

The Spirit of Justice

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Summary: Contact is lost with the planet of New Eden in 2542, where will the mystery lead the crew of the UNSC Spirit of Justice? Please read and review

1. Prologue

****Prologue: October 14th 2542****

****Location: Orbit above New Eden****

"Will the Captain please report to the bridge immediately." These were the words which Captain Alexander Wallace awoke to. He gazed around his cabin in a sleep induced daze and muttered several curses under his breath having realised that he must have fallen asleep while writing reports. He sat up and straightened his collar, it would do no good for his crew to see a disheveled Captain.

In his short time as Captain of the UNSC destroyer Illustrious he had enforced high standards on a vessel which had, until his appointment, had something of a reputation in the fleet. Drinking, womanizing and in many cases drugs, had caused the last Captain to request a transfer and it had fallen on Wallace's shoulders to sort things out. Since his introduction to the ship there had been several cases which had left crew members in the brig or worse, in prison planet side. All in all though, the ship now had a reputation for high standards and discipline which was yet to be tested in combat.

As he hurried along the short corridor between his room and the bridge he contemplated what could be the problem but he chose to not make assumptions.

When he arrived the bridge was frantic and it didn't take long to see why. On the main view screens were views of a Covenant carrier with two escort Destroyers and a CCS class battle cruiser. All seemed dead

in space, recharging power after their return to normal space. "Sir", began his Lieutenant, "four Covenant ships have just appeared out of slipspace and appear to be powered down." Damn, he thought to himself, what would the Covenant want with a small, backwater planet like New Eden? "Okay", he replied, "Bring the ship up to combat alert alpha, I want a message sent to FLEETCOM asking for back up, and start charging the MAC gun, this is our chance to try and save some lives."

"Sir, the enemy ships are under power and their trajectories suggest that the carrier is moving towards the planet while the destroyers are moving to intercept local friendly forces. The battle cruiser is on a course for the _Illustrious, _your order Sir?"

Wallace contemplated the information quickly, "Bring us in on a course two, nine, three and give me full power capacity to the engines."

"Sir, that puts us directly between the two groups of enemy force?"

"Exactly, they can't fire if they might hit each other."

He felt the tug as the ship accelerated between the Covenant warships, "How long until the MAC is fully charged? He asked.

"Ready to fire on your order Sir' replied the officer on weapons control.

"Good, I want the shot timed so that when the battle cruiser begins charging weapons the MAC round hits it as it fires, that should throw off their aim. Give me a review of how the rest of the fleet is doing."

"Not good Sir, the destroyers have wiped out our forces and the destroyers have already began glassingâ€¦ wait ... I'm getting strange readings from the carrier Sir, it seems to be building up a huge amount of energy."

"What are those bastards up to?" Wallace asked, half to himself.

Suddenly the carrier seemed to ripple in space and and blueish purple wave seemed to spread out from it. As the wave passed both Covenant and UNSC ships all signs of power vanished from them. "EMP", yelled Wallace, "Cut all power!" He was too late, his ship was sapped of all power, life support failed and the ship was filled with the sound of thousands of people asphyxiating.

2. Chapter 1

****Contact Lost: October 17th 2542****

****Location: Castle Base, Reach****

"Three days ago the colony of New Eden reported itself as under attack by Covenant forces, since then we have not heard from the planet. Therefore it is the decision of the UNSC Security council to send the newly outfitted Ex-Colony ship, _Spirit of Justice, _to

investigate under your command, Captain Price." explained Lord Hood to the newly promoted Captain John Price. "It's an honour Sir", said Price, shaking the Admirals hand, "Do I have permission to leave immediately?"

"Not quite yet", replied Hood, "I want you to read up on what your ship is capable of, she's different to any ship you've used before, she's been fitted with weaponry taken from the remains of Covenant warships so it may take time to get used to it. You should get to your ship today and spend some time for Lieutenant Shaw to explain everything to you, he's been onboard for days, learning how things run."

"Thanks you Sir, I'll depart immediately." Said Price, as he turned on his heel and departed his meeting with the Security Council.

On his way to the landing pad where a Pelican would take him to the _Justice_ he wondered exactly what weapons had been fitted to his new ship, and why he had never heard of Covenant weapons being commandeered before.

Upon his arrival at the pad the dropship was prepped for launch and he stepped onboard and began his ten minute journey up through the atmosphere. Through the port holes in the Pelican he easily spotted what was to be his ship. It was big, that was the first thing he noticed, it looked similar to the ship his long time friend, Captain James Cutter, had served on until he went missing during the events surrounding the planet Harvest. It also had weaponry that was recognizably Covenant in design, despite being repainted the standard UNSC grey.

As his dropship got closer he saw that the hull had been heavily reinforced with an unrecognizable material, it was far darker than the titanium A most warships were covered in, he made a mental note to ask Shaw what it was during his tour of the ship.

He felt the sudden pull of gravity as he entered the artificial gravity of the larger vessel and there was a dull thud as the Pelican touched down on the deck. Price stood when he felt this and walked towards the slowly opening hatch and looked out into the hangar.

Standing calmly before him as he stepped out was his most loyal and skilled officer, his long term Weapons Controller, Lieutenant Shaw. Shaw snapped off a quick salute which Price returned. "At ease, Lieutenant, I understand this ship has some interesting accessories you can show me?"

"Yes Sir", he replied in an excited voice and beckoned for Price to follow. "Most important of all the additions is without a doubt the weapons Sir, we have twelve Covenant plasma turrets. We don't know where the Covenant get their plasma from but we managed to create a limited supply of our own using what was left in the turrets we found, what we have isn't as powerful as Covenant plasma at eating through a hull but it's fired in a much more concentrated beam making it better suited for getting through Covenant shields. We have a limited number of shots but we can make use of drones to plunder destroyed enemy ships for their plasma reserves. We have sixteen point defense turrets, the same type as we're used to working with. The ship also features two MAC cannons which are bigger than the

cannons on a destroyer making them some of the biggest shipboard cannons in use."

"That sounds fantastic, but surely the reactor will struggle keeping up with the power demands?" asked Price, suspiciously.

"Normally yes, Sir, that would be the case but, we've found a way of keeping the reactor cooler for longer, the coolant pipes now run along the outside of the ship making it easier for them to vent heat into space, this does make them more vulnerable than they would usually but the extra power could give us an edge in combat." explained the eager lieutenant, who sounded like a kid in a sweet shop.

"I noticed a strange material on the hull, what was it?", he asked, "It's an alloy of titanium and a small amount of the stuff Covenant ships are made of, making it much better at deflecting plasma." explained Shaw

"Very good, very impressive, Price muttered thoughtfully, "Take me to the bridge, Lieutenant."

"This way Sir" guided Shaw.

****Arrival: October 24th 2542****

****Location: Space above New Eden, _Spirit of Justice_****

"Sir", called the Ensign on the Nav Console, "We've just exited slipspace above New Eden, there's a lot of interference from an unknown source, opening viewports now."

The sliding covers over the bridge windows slid, smoothly up revealing the utter devastation in orbit and on the planet below. The hulks of both UNSC and Covenant ships lay, lifeless in orbit. The planet below bore the signs of the Covenant, huge swathes of the planet still glowed dull red from the glassing while other sections still appeared to be intact except for huge craters where ships had fallen from the sky after losing power. "Christ", whispered Price, removing his hat and holding it in his out of respect for the hundreds of thousands of corpses still on the ships in orbit.

"Ensign Fairway", he called to the woman on sensors, "Are there any life signs out there? Any clues about what happened here? It looks like the Covenant were glassing but something interrupted them." asked the Captain, still trying to regain his composure after seeing destruction on such a scale. "No Sir, there's nothing left alive in orbit, there are limited life signs on the planet and some could be wildlife." replied the Ensign, clearly shocked by what she was seeing.

"Right", said Price, decisively, snapping himself and his crew out of their daze, "Launch the drones to try and salvage as much plasma as possible from the Covenant wrecks, alert me of any complications, and set scanners to try and find and residual communications imprints left in space. Prepare to lock targets for the Archer missiles, just in case." A chorus of "Yes Sirs" rose from around the bridge as the crew began their appointed tasks.

This left Price to simply sit there in his command chair, considering what could have caused every ship in system to be destroyed with very little damage to, at least, all the Covenant ships. Price was jolted from his thoughts by the voice of Lieutenant Shaw, "Sir, permission to bring our new AI online." requested Shaw.

"Of course", replied Price, "Why wasn't I told we had one until now? We could have saved a lot of time."

"The AI has spent to the journey here being properly installed into the mainframe by the techs, it's only just ready to be brought online now." explained the Lieutenant, "I'm bringing her on now."

The holographic pedestal at Price's side came to life and a slender figure appeared. "Initializing" said the AI in an emotionless and robotic voice, the hologram dimmed and the lit up again. The AI suddenly came to life, "Greeting Captain Price it's a pleasure to be serving with you, your combat record is rather impressive, I'm your new AI, as I'm sure you knew, my name is Sarah and I am a second generation smart AI, UNSC Service number SRH-0873-9883-037. I am capable of everything the AIs you have served with before were but to a higher standard."

"A pleasure to meet you Sarah. Would you please keep an eye on how the drones are doing and where necessary remotely control them past obstacles or if you deem it is necessary to guide them because they are suffering problems." ordered Price

"Certainly Sir, shall I target the scans currently being run more accurately to speed up the process?" Price saw a filthy look be thrown at the AI by Ensign Fairway who had been running the scans until the AI arrived on the scene. "That would be excellent Sarah, thank you."

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For over an hour John Price watched as _The Spirit of Justice drifted through the floating graveyard collecting plasma, supplies and any ammunition that could be salvaged from the carcasses of the now lifeless ships. Suddenly Sarah's holographic form popped up on the pedestal, "Sir, the comms scan is complete and I have compiled a group of messages that go part way to explaining what happened here."

"Play them." ordered Price and the bridge fell into silence as the story of the how the current situation arose. How the Covenant appeared from no where, smashing the planet's defenses and beginning glassing in a horribly short time, until suddenly the description of how the Covenant Carrier was building up power and then how the EMP rang out across the system, followed by the dying, choking breaths of those aboard every UNSC vessel as they were starved of oxygen by the powerless life support systems.

When the scenario was finished silence remained on the bridge for several moments on the bridge until it was finally broken by Sarah, "Sir, I hate to interrupt but could I suggest that we send down the Marines to investigate the surface, see if that will tell us more?"

"Yes", said Price slowly, still reeling from the previous

presentation.

"Orders relayed, the Marines should be heading planet side in minutes."

"Good", replied Price, "and Sarahâ€¦| Send the Spartans"

3. Chapter 2

****That Which is Left: October 24th 2542****

****Location: Space above New Eden, _Spirit of Justice_****

"Alright Marines!" yelled the Sergeant, "The job falls once again to go down onto the surface of a planet and find out what the hell is going on down there. SO, lets lock and load and get your asses on those Pelicans!" Sergeant Major Avery Johnson nodded confidently and crossed his arms to watch as a group of thirty Marines rushed to get their armor, rifles and gear ready to go planet side. On one side of the huge hangar bay was a group of soldiers clad in green armor, they sat around sharpening knives, cleaning their rifles and chatting as they waited for the Marines to get ready. Sometime Johnson wondered why the Spartan II program was considered such a failure when there were seven foot soldiers who made the Covenant run just be appearing in the field.

On the other side of the bay the Spartan talked amongst themselves as their commander debriefed them:

"Alright squad", said Master Chief Spartan 117 to his team, "I want everyone ready to go five minutes ago, get your gear stowed, your weapons chosen and us on the Pelican now."

With a simple chorus of "Yes Sir"s the Spartans were packing gear and selecting their weapons. John chose a standard issue assault rifle and attached it to his back using the magnetic panels and a pistol on his thigh, Kelly selected two sub-machine guns, Linda selected her sniper rifle, already fitted with her preferred scope and perfectly zeroed to her and her alone, Fred, as usual, went for a shotgun and a grenade launcher.

With the selection complete each Spartan grabbed some grenades and boarded their Pelican.

In the time it had taken the Spartans to get ready the Marines had got to the stage of choosing their weapons, most went with an assault rifle with the occasional shotgun or rocket wielder.

Less than two minutes later the Pelicans had Warthogs fitted underneath and then the familiar roar of their engines starting up filled the bay and slowly all the Pelicans lifted off the deck and cycled through the airlock and into space. The through the floating graveyard was uneventful and silent, everyone mourning the terrible losses surrounding them as they flew past and down through the atmosphere.

Once the Pelicans were through the atmosphere Sergeant Johnson's voice came through on the comm, "Alright men", he began, "You will be split into three groups. Team one, your with me, we're searching the

main city in the southern hemisphere. Team two will be under the command of Sergeant Perez, you will check out the crash site of a particularly large lump of Covenant Carrier and Team three will be the Spartans, you will be dropped off in an area of jungle which is impenetrable save for comms and the most rudimentary of scans, there were some strange readings but no comm response visuals couldn't tell us anything. Alright Marines, good luck."

****Spartan Team: October 24th 2542****

****Location: Unknown Jungle, Surface of New Eden****

"Spartans, this is the best landing spot I've seen so I'm gonna drop you off here." called the pilot over the radio.

As the Pelican dropped down into a gap in the canopy it became clear what had caused it, a Seraph fighter must have been in atmosphere when the EMP went off, shutting down its systems and causing it to crash in the jungle. As the Spartans dropped from the Pelican they landed with a squelch, revealing that the ground wasn't fit for the weight of a fully armored Spartan. Each of them had to pull their boots out of the mud and clamber up onto the ruined hull of the Seraph before they could get a good view of where they were.

"We'll split up, Kelly and I will head west, Fred and Linda, you head east."

Without a word the Spartans split into pairs and headed off into jungle. John and Kelly were walking for an hour with Kelly in the lead, both of them cutting a path through the jungle with ease.

Suddenly Kelly came to a halt. She pointed to the ground at a glowing blue line, disappearing off into the undergrowth. On closer inspection it looked like plasma but unlike that used by the Covenant it was blue and seemed to be of a different consistency. The two followed the line of into the jungle, their curiosity piqued.

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Fred and Linda had headed off in the opposite direction and had come to a sheer cliff face going up at least fifteen meters, the two handled it the way only Spartans could and used their sheer strength to smash hand holds into the rock face as they clambered up. Half way through their ascent they heard a strange, electronic sound coming from above them.

As they got higher the source came into sight, it was a strange metallic hatchway built into the cliff face. "Linda", began Fred, "Do you reckon it could be worth investigating this hatchway?"

"Our mission was to explore east, I suspect that this hatchway is something worth investigating so I think it is, lets get to and try to open it." replied Linda calmly over the comm.

As Fred approached it he began to wonder how the hatch could be opened, whether it had a motion sensor, but as he came closer this theory was quickly rejected as the hatch remained shut. "It won't open, should I make it open?" asked Fred.

"I guess it couldn't hurt but before you do I'll check in with John, explain the situation." explained Linda. "John, we've found a hatchway in a cliff face, we think its worth investigating." her sentence was answered with static from the comm, "Damn", she muttered, "Fred, cIan't get through on the comm, I think we should just get through the hatch and explore."

"Agreed." So, using strength only a Spartan is capable of Fred gripped around the edge of the hatch cover and pulled, there was a screech of metal and the hatch came off the a shower of sparks and it fell to the bottom of the cliff face with a thud. Fred clambered through the hatch and into the tight confines of the tunnel, followed soon after by Linda.

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John and Kelly had been following the glowing trail for ten minutes when it began to branch off to the left and after another minute or two following the glow they came to a large open area enshrouded by a cliff face on one side and dense jungle on the other. Several of the plasma pipes met in the centre of the courtyard. Behind this and half built into the cliff was a building unlike anything they had seen before. It was short and vaguely pyramidal in shape with buttresses coming from the cliff face. Whoever had designed it obviously hated curves because there were almost none on the structure which gave it a certain angular beauty.

The strange plasma pipeline continued off into the structure bathing the inside with a strange blue glow. Above the doorway was a single blue symbol the likes of which neither Spartan had ever seen before. Rifles at the ready the head into the structure in total silence except for the steady dripping of water off the trees.

As the pair headed into the structure the only illumination came from the plasma line, in the dim light shadows played across the walls as the two Spartans walked deeper into the building. "Turn on your flashlight." John ordered, they both switched on their lights. In the slightly increased light Kelly could make out a console on the wall, after alerting John to it they both headed over to study it further. Scrawled across the screen were different commands, all in the same, strange dialect as symbol above the entrance. "What should we press?" asked Kelly, for a moment John didn't respond, seemingly deep in thought until, without warning, he reached out and lightly pressed one of the symbols. The ones present rearranged and changed shape to give more options, underneath was a marked place to press a hand. John pressed his palm to the spot and at once the console flashed blue and the room was instantly brightly illuminated with light from an unknown source. The two Spartans were momentarily disoriented by the sudden light.

Then, as if from nowhere a voice began to speak, it sounded childish, youthful and yet at the same time did not lack intelligence, most likely it was an artificial intelligence, "I am _934 Infinite Valour_, you have entered storage facility 21-B.", the voice chirped through hidden speakers, "Welcome humans, it has been long since my creators died out. This is an automated system, I am sorry but at this moment we cannot permit entrance to this facility due to a security breach from an unknown location." the voice stopped and the Spartans eyed each other warily, "Should we leave? It doesn't seem

like we're welcome."

"No", replied John, "We came this far, that thing was an automated system, any threat has probably long since run out of power."

"Fine, but if anything goes wrong, I'm blaming you." muttered Kelly. The two headed deeper into the facility, prepared for possible threats and answers to questions.

The artificial voice rang out again, catching both Spartans off guard, "While I am pleased that you are so set on visiting my facility you have now entered the zone in which the security breach was, therefore Sentinels will be dispatched to remove you and the other intruders if you do not leave." As the voice died down there was total silence until suddenly there was the sound of metal scraping on metal high above them, both looked up in time to see one of the many metal covered hatches high above them come flying off and an armored head poke out of the hole. "Fred?" called John confusedly over the comm, recognizing his fellow Spartan by his IFF tag. "Err, yes, how do we all meet up when we started in totally opposite directions?" asked Fred

"I don't know", replied John, his voice sounding uncertain, "Is Linda with you?"

"Yes, she is" replied Linda on Fred's behalf. Both Spartans jumped down from their hatch with the grace of acrobats, landing in a roll to take the force out of the fall. "Alright squad", ordered John, "seeing as we've all met up lets move forward togeth-" he was cut short as a familiar artificial voice cut him off mid sentence, "Warning, you have entered this facility without permission and ignored all prior warnings, the Sentinels have been ordered to eliminate what are clearly hostile forces." the voice ended abruptly and every hatchway in the room gracefully swung open releasing a strange, floating robot into the room. Without warning a lance of orange energy shot from the floating machine and struck Fred square in the chest.

4. Chapter 3

****A Lost People: October 24th 2542****

****Location: City of New Washington, Surface of New Eden****

"Alright Marines, lets go, go,go!" yelled Johnson as the Pelican came down low enough for the Marines onboard to jump, almost simultaneously every Marine stood and charged down the exit ramp and onto the cracked tarmac in the centre of the city of New Washington, the capital city of the planet New Eden. It was once a beautiful city, designed by the same architects who created the vast cities on Reach, this beauty without the military aspect of Reach had made the city a popular destination with both settlers and tourists alike.

As the Marines looked around what they saw felt far short of what they had heard of the place, many of the once soaring skyscrapers now bore burn marks and many were now crumbling ruins. It was sad to look at and as the Marines spread out to ensure there was no enemy presence they all bore looks that mirrored the scale of devastation wrought on New Eden over such a short time, it was the first time

humanity had caught a planet, frozen in the middle of a glassing and the state of the place was terrible.

The thirty marines split into six teams of five to cover as much of the city as possible in as little time as possible. Team one was with Johnson, they took the north of the city, furthest from the start of the glassing. As they progressed, thoroughly checking every building they passed in the search for survivors, many of the Marines began to notice a strange smell coming from the direction they were walking in. Johnson himself summed up the scent, "Stay sharp Marines, we got the smell of death up our noses!"

Upon their arrival at a plaza in the city the source of the smell was revealed. Down the street to the left was a sight that made every Marine need to sit down and calm themselves, some threw up while others burst into tears. In the middle of the road was a massive pile of bodies. The smell was unbearable. The pile must have been there for days and the pile had begun to rot. As Johnson looked closer there were maggots crawling out of holes in the victims flesh, eye sockets and mouths. He gagged at the sight. "Marines", he called, his usual gusto gone, "Lets keep moving, there's nothing to be gained here."

As a group they moved out. Every few blocks they caught sight of another pile of bodies in varying states of decay. Eventually they came to the main city hospital, as they searched through the building it was like a ghost town, only the occasional body of a dead doctor or a patient murdered in their sleep gave evidence that it had once been part of a bustling city. As Johnson made ready to clear another ward he heard a muffled cry from inside a private room. He walked in and curled up in the corner was a young woman with a look of terror etched on her face. "It's alright", whispered Johnson, his voice hushed, "the Covenant are all gone from the planet, all dead and forgotten."

"How can I trust you?" she asked suspiciously.

"How can you trust me?" replied Johnson, "You can trust me because you have no reason not to, I have spent the last seventeen years of my life killing every damn alien that got in my way. I've been injured, I've lost friends but I never betrayed humanity. I saved every life I could, and that is going to include yours."

"Alright, I trust you, for now. Can you get me off this planet? I want to leave. she replied, the look of terror still not lost from her eyes. "Follow me", explained Johnson, "We'll go outside and I'll call in a transport to get you out of here." Together they headed out of the hospital and Johnson explained to command back on the ship that he had a survivor needing immediate retrieval. They waited in silence for the Pelican to arrive and to her to the Justice. When it finally arrived she climbed onboard and it left back into space. It was only then that Johnson realised he had never asked her name. He vowed to find out if he ever got off the planet.

He regathered his Marines and continued to scour the city for survivors, vowing to save every life he could.

****Return: October 24th 2542****

****Location: Space above New Eden, Spirit of Justice****

Captain Price sighed to himself. It had been just under twelve hours since the _Spirit of Justice _had dropped out of slipspace above New Eden and so far other than learning that the Covenant had an EMP weapon that when used wiped out both UNSC and Covenant ships and that replenishing his supply of plasma and hearing from Johnson that had found total devastation in New Washington and only one survivor, he had learnt very little.

Contact had been lost with the Spartan team once they had touched down and the second Marine team had also gone missing. He no doubt that the Spartans could handle themselves but he worried about the Marines. His train of thought was interrupted as Sarah's holographic form appeared on the pedestal at his side, "Captain, I'm picking up multiple inbound slipspace signatures, so unless the the Brass didn't want us to get lonely I think we're about to get some company."

"Thank you, Sarah, bring the ship up to combat alert alpha, release the locks on the nuke and get me predetermined targeting on the inbound enemy ships, I want to hit them as soon as they exit slipspace, while they're still out of power from the jump." ordered Price.

"Yes Sir, locks on the Shiva and estimated targeting in progress for each entry location." replied Sarah, the strain of tracking multiple inbound ships that weren't there, locking onto this location and preparing to time the launch as soon as the enemy ships appeared, was evident on her holographic face.

Suddenly three slipspace ruptures appeared above the planet in slightly away from their estimated points, Sarah quickly recalculated and launched the Shiva warhead in between the ships. One was a destroyer, the other two CCS class battle cruisers. The nuke went between the destroyer and one of the battle cruisers and detonated, bathing all three ships in a harsh white light. When the light cleared the stem connecting the destroyers engines to the front, bulbous section of the ship had been wiped out and a huge chunk was missing from the battle cruiser, showing a hole all the way to the reactor. "Sarah, charge the MAC and set Archer missile pods A through D to lock onto the whole in that battle cruiser and target their reactor and bring the ship up above the other battle cruiser and then down behind their engines." Just as the Captain gave his command both battle cruisers came to life and fired of three plasma torpedoes and _The Spirit of Justice._ The torpedoes locked onto the ship and accelerated. From the _Spirit _there was a puff of exhaust smoke and over a hundred Archer missiles sped off towards the damaged cruiser. The _Spirit _accelerated down behind the second battle cruiser, the enemy realising too late what Price was doing and four of the plasma projectiles impacted on the cruisers shields, overpowering them.

The remaining two torpedoes soared over the helm of the cruiser and impacted square in the rear of the _Spirit _causing it to spin end over end. On the bridge crimson warning flashed on almost every display. "Status report", called Price over the sirens going off on the bridge console and the officers trying to get back into their chairs, "Fires and decks K through M, sealing off those sections and venting off the atmosphere to kill the fires. Archer pods G through K damaged beyond repair." reported Sarah. Summing up the damage to his ship in comparison with the battle cruiser and gave the orders he

most hated, "Get us to the moon on the other side of the planet, with or without its shields that cruiser is still more than a match for us, divert all power keeping the MAC charged to engines." he said sadly, he always hated giving the order to retreat, in his experience it more often than not meant he had lost a fight, something he hated doing.

The _Spirit of Justice_ accelerated around the far side of the planet, away from the cruiser. It made no move to follow them, seemingly happy just to sit in orbit, mourning the loss of its fellows. Once in position behind the moon, out of sight of the cruiser, Price decided it was time to check in on his ground teams. "Sarah, I want to try and contact the Spartan team, see if they've had any luck."

"Certainly Sir, I'll try to establish a connectionâ€¦ Good news Sir, it appears that whatever was interfering with the comm before has gone, connection established." explained Sarah.

From the speaker in the Command chair static buzzed until it was suddenly replaced with a voice, "Captain, this is Spartan 117 reporting in, it's good to finally have to comms working, we found a structure in the jungle. It clearly wasn't built by humans, the prerecorded messages we were given while inside claimed that whatever civilisation built the structure has long since died out. We then came under attack from remote drones, named Sentinels, armed with some kind of energy projector, with which Spartan 104 was hit in the chest. He is currently unconscious with severe burns, we have taken refuge in a cave at grid reference 093, 874 and I am requesting clearance for medical evac to the _Spirit of Justice_ for him. The Sentinels are currently patrolling the jungle and we are in serious danger." explained the Spartan.

"Alright Spartan, I'm granting evac for your entire team. We're pulling you out, more Covenant ships arrived in system not long ago, we took two out but one cruiser I still intact, I'm sending a Pelican in for you, prepare for dust off asap at your location."

"I understand." the Spartan replied simply.

"Sir, I have an incoming transmission from Johnson's team marked as urgent." exclaimed Sarah, "Patch it through." ordered Price

"Sir", yelled Johnson over the comm, "We found what was left of Team two, they came under attack from unknown hostiles with advanced technology, only four out of the original thirty are left. We are currently under attack from the same unknown hostiles and we're taking heavy casualtiesâ€¦", the sergeant paused for a moment and then his voice came back his voice grimmer than before, "I have also spotted multiple Covenant drop ships in approach, the some of the unknown hostiles have moved to engage. Requesting immediate dust off before things get any hotter."

"Certainly Sergeant but it may take time to get anything through to you, there is a Covenant battle cruiser in orbit and it is unclear if it will attack any incoming drop ships at this time. We will of course find out as soon as possible and get you out of there." replied Sarah, calmly, "Captain, would we be able to send an empty lifeboat past the enemy to see if they attack it."

"Good idea Sarah, launch the pod immediately and get three Pelicans prepped for launch, two for Johnson's team and one for the Spartan team."

They all felt the thud as a lone lifeboat blasted free and made its way towards the planet under Sarah's guidance. As it neared the battle cruiser the bridge crew held their collective breaths. Seconds passed as the lifeboat passed the massive battle cruiser and entered the planets atmosphere. The crews collective breaths were released as the cruiser didn't even turn to inspect the tiny craft. "Okay", Price began, breaking the silence, "Send the Pelicans in to collect the Spartans and Marines, tell the pilots to open fire on anything that isn't human."

"Yes Sir, Pelicans launching now, sending the pick up coordinates to the Spartans and Marines." complied Sarah.

****Evac: October 25th 2542****

****Location: Unknown Jungle, Surface of New Eden****

"You all heard the man, lets get out of here." John ordered his Spartans, they crawled out of the small cave, Linda carried Fred over her shoulder with her pistol in her spare hand. Above the jungle canopy they could see the shapes of Sentinels soaring through the sky, trying to find the Spartans. Suddenly, one stopped and oriented itself to face the Spartans below, it slowly descended as if seeing whether they really were a threat, none of them moved until the projector started to glow again as it built up a charge. "Run!" yelled John, already halfway into the dense undergrowth with the Sentinel hot on his tail. In the distance they could barely make out the sound of the Pelicans engines, much closer however was the strange thrumming of a Covenant drop ship. Then, they could see it, its two pronged shape lowering out of the sky, troop hatches swinging open ready to deploy the warriors within. The Sentinel had seen it too and abandoned its chase with the Spartans and headed skyward to intercept the new threat. From all over the area a swarm of Sentinels soared towards the drop ship. Every one of them charged their energy projectors. As the beams hit the drop ship they melted through the metal where it touched it and the screams of agony from the occupants could be heard when the beams hit them. Suddenly the drop ship lurched out of control as the area where the pilot must have been located was punctured by one of the energy lances.

As one of the plasma coils powering the drop ship was hit by an energy lance and the transport disappeared in an explosion of blue and purple flames, debris fell from the sky and littered the area with bits of twisted metal and burnt flesh. In the time this had happened the Spartans had run away at top speed through the trees. As they neared the extraction point the thrum of the Pelican's engine became louder.

As they came closer to the clearing where the Pelican had dropped them off the day before. As the Spartans rushed onboard they heard the sound of the chain gun on the nose of the Pelican open up, "Get onboard Spartans, I don't know how long I can hold these things off for!" Out of nowhere a Sentinel dropped down behind the hatch to the interior of the Pelican and before anyone noticed it, it had charged up its energy projector and fired it through the troop bay and into the cockpit, they heard a scream as the pilot was hit, causing the

Pelican to fall back down to the ground the ground with a thud. "Kelly, get into the cockpit and get this thing moving." called John.

"Already on it!" Kelly called back, as she leapt into the pilot's seat and wrestled with the controls to pull the Pelican from its place in the mud, easier said than done since it was steadily sinking nose first into the wet mud. The engines strained as they tried to pull the Pelican up, the sound of the wet mud gripping onto the belly of the transport echoed through the hull until, with a sudden lurch, it shot up into the air and away. The drop ship accelerated up into the air, still hounded by a group of the Sentinels.

"John, I need you up here to take charge of the gun, the targeting system got fried."

"Be right there Kelly, Linda, take care of Fred." ordered John as he charged up into the cockpit and sat down heavily in the copilots chair. He looked down at the controls and began to take control of the chain gun using the camera mounted under the barrel. He swung it round and got one of the Sentinels in his sights and opened up. As the rounds impacted came close to the lead Sentinel a shield popped up and the rounds began bouncing off. "Damn! They've got shields!" yelled John over the roar of the engines and the gun. "Keep firing, if they're anything like Covenant shields they have to give in eventually!" called back Kelly.

"Linda", yelled John, "Grab your rifle and try and use the higher velocity rounds to punch through the shields."

"Right away Sir." she called back, her voice taking on the ice cold tone it always did when she got her eyes behind the scope of her sniper rifle. Not long after the sniper added its firepower to the chain gun the Sentinel's shield popped and the chassis was peppered with rounds and it exploded in a ball of flames and tumbled out of the sky. One by one the Sentinel's shields fell followed swiftly by their owners. As the back hatch of the Pelican swung shut with a hiss sealing in the vacuum they reached the edge of the atmosphere.

In the distance they could see New Eden's moon, behind which hid their destination, The Spirit of Justice. As they sped up to pass behind the moon there was commotion behind them. "John, we've got Seraphs on our tail, we need to get to the Spirit as fast as we can!" called Linda from the troop compartment.

"Kelly, Linda, get your suits sealed and make sure Fred is airtight. I'm going to open the rear hatch, the atmosphere evacuating should give us the boost we need to get back in time."

As the hatch slowly opened the force of the evacuating air the door, already damaged by the Sentinels, was ripped off and hurled off into space, hitting one of the pursuing Seraphs was hit by the door, seemingly temporarily stunned by the impact the pilot lost control and went swinging off course and into the debris field the previous battles fought above the planet. It impacted on several medium sized lumps of metal, chipping through the shield before one got through and smashed open the cockpit sending it spinning even further into the debris field before it finally impacted on a large slab on what had once been a UNSC frigate and exploding silently in the vacuum.

As the Pelican cycled through the air lock and into the hangar there was panic on the bridge.

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"Sir, I have more inbound slipspace ruptures above the planet." Sarah warned, "I'm still calculating exact numbers but there are easily more than fifty inbound ships."

"FIFTY!", spluttered Captain Price, "That's more Covenant ships than I've ever seen in one place!" he paused for a minute to regain his composure after the shock of learning how many ships were coming. "Get the Marines out of there asap, with the Spartans onboard we're just waiting for them and we can leave. I think we've overstayed our welcome."

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"Marines, I've got good news and bad news for you. Good news is the word has come down we're pulling out, the bad news is they ain't picking us up here, because we're Marines we gotta walk our way home. The extraction point is three blocks south and, with these new hostiles in the skies, we're gonna have to shoot our way there." Sergeant Johnson bellowed to the congregated Marines, now under his command. "I'm splitting you into the teams you were in before things went pear shaped, for those of you who weren't in my team your in my squad to replace the men we lost on the way here. Get into your teams and get ready to move asap. My squad, we've pulled the short straw, we're leading the way."

It was five minutes before the Marines were ready to move and when they were the sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows down the road, forcing the Marines to turn on their flashlights to be able to keep an eye on the shadows. As they made their way through the streets there was total silence save for the thumping of the Marine's boots. "Sir!", called one of the Marines, "Covenant dropship on approach!", true enough the shape of the SpiÂ§rit dropship silhouetted against the sky. The troop hatches opened releasing three elites and a group of five grunts. In a hail of gunfire three of the grunts were riddled with bullet holes and the elites shields flared.

All the Marines found some sort of cover, behind cars, bins, benches and bollards. The Covenant troops didn't have a chance, they were under fire from thirty Marines and the elite's shields quickly fell and they found themselves in pieces on the pavement, their deep purple blood mixing with the bright blue blood from the grunts making a filthy mix flowing down the street. The team cautiously got to their feet and began moving down the street towards their objective. As they passed the next block they were forced to walk past another of the heaps of bodies, another day after they had seen their first pile the pile was a little bit more decomposed and burnt in places leaving the heap stinking of rotting flesh. The Marines who hand't come across one of the piles before went pale, a few fighting the urge to gag as they passed the heap.

Just ahead of them they could see the pickup point and they started to feel the hope. From behind them they could hear the sound of the Sentinels accelerating towards them. The danger was confirmed as the

sound of screams came from behind them as the Sentinels soared overhead, carving up the Marines with their energy beams. From high above the sound of a Pelican could be heard on approach, the Sentinels noticed it as well and a flock of them surged up to attack the aircraft.

As they charged up their projectors to hit the Pelican there was a gasp of shock and when the energy lances hit the Pelican they carved through the hull and hit the fuel tank, which ignited the fuel and it disappeared in a ball of orange flame. The other Pelican seemed to be safe for the moment as the Sentinels overshot it and began to start a wide arc to turn around and keep their speed up.

The final Pelican lowered itself to the ground the Marines charged up the ramp and into the troop transport, however, one Pelican struggled to take up the eighteen remaining Marines. Once all were onboard the pilot began to pull up, the engines straining against the sheer weight of the Marines. By this time the Sentinels had completed their turn and were coming back in for another attack. When the Pelican was a few hundred meters of the ground the Sentinels opened fire and one of the lances hit the front starboard engine forcing the Pelican to fall out of control before the pilot was able to get what was left of the engines under control, force them to work past their recommended limits and target the nose mounted chain guns onto the Sentinels.

As they soared up through the atmosphere, smoke pouring from the damaged engine. One by one the Sentinels were knocked out of the sky until one remained. Recognizing that it was fighting a losing battle and swung back down towards the planet to join up with its fellows.

The Marines yelled a cheer, believing that they had won the battle and were free to go home. Johnson didn't join the cheer, suspicious that the Sentinels had given in so easily.

5. Chapter 4

****Are We There Yet?: October 25th 2542****

****Location: Space above New Eden,_ Spirit of Justice_****

"Sarah, eta on inbound Covenant ships." ordered Captain Price, worried that the enemy would arrive before he could get away.

"Any moment now Sir, but the Marine's Pelican should be back soon and we can get under way, I've already calculated the slipspace jump." explained Sarah.

Just as she finished her sentence warning popped up on the main screen. The Covenant fleet had arrived. A fleet of dozens of carriers, destroyers and battle cruisers. From the planet rose a huge swarm of hundreds of the strange machines the Spartans and Marines had come across planet side. The surged up to meet the Covenant fleet, the group glowing orange as they charged their weapons. The Covenant fleet charged up as well, preparing to return fire on the Sentinels. Some Covenant ships never got the chance to fire as the Sentinels split up into squadrons of up to twenty, together they focused their beams on a single point of a ship, the combined power cutting straight through the ships' shields and causing chain

reactions to explode in the hull.

Within moments several Covenant ships were in pieces. Then the rest of the Covenant ships opened fire, the Sentinels, even in teams didn't stand a chance against the fire power of the fleet, the torpedoes vaporized the Sentinels they touched and melted those that got too close. It wasn't long until there were few Sentinels left and they were forced to retreat back down to the surface. The fleet spread out into a line stretching horizontally from pole to pole.

"Jesus Christ!", whispered Price, "They must be starting the glassing soon."

"I'm not so sure Sir, the pattern they're in isn't any of the glassing patterns that have been recorded, I think they may be up to something elseâ€¦ Oh my God." Sarah yelled, "I'm detecting the same energy reading that was picked up when the Covenant launched their EMP during the first invasion, they must be planning to launch another one."

"But why? What are they trying to get rid of? They wiped out the drones and the only UNSC ship here is us and they're either ignoring us or haven't seen us." called Lieutenant Shaw across the bridge.

"My hypothesis is that they seek to destroy all electrical systems on the planet, perhaps they fear that these drones are a serious threat to them and they want to use the EMP to wipe out all electronics in the drones that are here and any factories on the planet that may be producing them, although with the limited data I have that is just a hypothesis. One thing doesn't add up though, the first EMP should have destroyed the Sentinels, or perhaps it was the EMP that activated them when they used it to destroy the planets defenses." said Sarah thoughtfully.

"Sir, EMP burst detected from one of those carriers!" yelled the Ensign on sensors.

"Sarah, cut power to all systems, otherwise we're screwed! Don't bother with safety measures, just cut all power to everything, including you!" yelled Price, before he'd even finished his sentence the bridge went dark and every screen went dead. The ship began to shudder as the EMP rocked the vessel.

As Price steadily brought all systems back online the bridge was lit with the dull red glow of emergency lighting until that system too was restored. Last on was Sarah, when she appeared it was as if they had survives unscathed until Sarah yelled a warning, "Captain, we're being pulled into the gravity of the moon, without power to the engines we must have been falling towards it. I'm trying to pull up even as we speak but I think we're going to hit." her sentence was punctuated by the sound of screeching metal and breaking glass from decks below as the observation decks mounted below the ship were ripped of by the impact with the small rocky moon.

"Sir, we've lost the spire the observation deck was on underneath the ship when we scraped the moon. Including the long range communications and sensors." reported one of the bridge crew. "Shit, launch one of the Clarion drones, I want a visual on that Covenant

fleet now!" yelled Price. The bridge was shrouded in a tense silence of the drone was launched and moved to provide a view of what had happened on the planet.

The sight which appeared on the bridge was stunning, the planet seemed to be on fire with electrical thunderstorms induced by the in atmosphere EMP, the fleet itself was motionless, all lights on the ships were out and the only sign they still functioned was a faint glow from around the engine baffles. Then, without warning hundreds of slipspace ruptures appeared above the planet followed by one enormous burst of light from the other dimension and massive— ship wasn't the right word, it was a space station but bigger than anything artificial ever witnessed by human eyes. It was shaped strangely, a massive central column tapering off at one end, attached by some invisible means to a rotating ring around the middle of the central spire. It sat, motionless in space. "Sir, I'm picking up a transmission from the that thing, patching it through now." called the Ensign on comms.

The voice that came through the speakers was vicious and full of malice as it spoke, "This is the Commander of the Covenant battle station Mirage of Deceit, we have locked your navigation systems in order that you may watch the cleansing of your world by the glorious fire of the Gods! This shall be the last act your pathetic eyes ever see!", the speaker was huge, even by elite standards and his voice was low, guttural and full of danger.

"Sir, he's telling the truth, I can't unlock the slipspace drive, we're under their control." said, Sarah, her voice sounding defeated.

"No, we've come this far and found out what happened here, we are getting them out of our systems and we are getting out of here." ordered Captain Price, his voice full of authority, "Sarah, see if their link to our ship works both ways, we've seen before how relatively simple Covenant software is so why would this be different? Follow the link to its source and we can try and take out the ship producing it."

"Yes Sir", said Sarah, her voice once again full of pride and confidence, "Following link to its source— It's coming from the Covenant carrier Limitless Faith, its near the edge of the fleet. I'll try and hack the systems remotely, if I can't we'll need to send troops to get me in manually" several tense moments followed as Sarah's face became a picture of concentration until, "Sorry Captain, I can't get a remote connection, I need to be taken over there to access their systems and temporarily screw up their fleet."

Price keyed the comm and began a ship wide broadcast, "This is the Captain speaking, will the Spartan team please report to the bridge immediately, it's urgent." Less than thirty seconds passed until the bridge slid open and three Spartans marched into the room and snapped off crisp salutes. "I'm sorry your other team member can't join you but I have a mission which, if successful, will save the lives of every man and woman on this ship. I need you to take Sarah's core over to a Covenant carrier and insert her into their mainframe, from there she can do the rest, but I need you to get her in and out of the ship as soon as possible. Master Chief, I'm entrusting you with the core but you all need to keep it safe, take a Pelican and get over there as soon as you can, I'll upload the location of the ship

as you go, good luck." The three Spartans snapped of another salute and charged off to the hangar bay.

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As they arrived in the hangar all three Spartans grabbed the same weapons they had had ground side, except Linda who grabbed a DMR to go with her sniper rifle, better suited for the close quarters combat on board the enemy ship.

They ran up the ramp and into the Pelican, Kelly leapt into the pilot seat and sealed the rear hatch. The Pelican lifted off as John and Linda took their seats. Just as they were cycling through the airlock a short message came through from Captain Price, "Spartans, I'm sending a squadron of Longswords to distract the Covenant forces so you can sneak past unnoticed."

As they exited the airlock and were spat into space the scale of the fleet they were in really hit home, they flew silently under the bellies of gigantic super carriers, destroyers and battle cruisers. They knew when the Longswords launched because the Seraphs sent to take care of them suddenly appeared, one noticed the tiny Pelican and accelerated behind it, firing a spray of plasma at the tiny dropship as Kelly span it and twisted left and right to dodge the plasma. One of the Longswords saw the Pelican being attacked and opened fire with its heavy machine guns, distracting the pilot of the Seraph and giving the Pelican a chance to get away. Then, they cleared the centre of the fleet and the carrier they were out to find was visible.

Kelly put the engines on max burn and the Pelican accelerated towards its target, as they entered the hangar the air inside the Pelican warmed noticeably as the Covenant inside the hangar opened fire on the Pelican. The rear ramp opened and the Spartans opened fire, Kelly and John almost leapt into the grunts and jackals, while Linda hung back and shot at any bit of exposed limb the jackals offered from behind their shields. Within minutes the hangar was clear and John hurried over to the terminal on the wall. He was so busy working on getting Sarah into the mainframe he didn't notice Kelly yelling at him until it was too late and the blistering heat of a Hunter's fuel rod shot hit him and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Linda began opening fire with her sniper rifle on any bit of orange flesh she could see through the Hunter's armor, until eventually both behemoths fell from the sheer number of holes in them. While Linda dealt with the Hunters Kelly ran over and finished getting Sarah into the ship and began stabilizing John's condition once Sarah was in. Once Sarah finished Kelly yanked the core and threw John over her shoulder and, with Linda already on board, got the Pelican off the ground and turned it around, "Linda!", Kelly called, "Get into the cockpit with John, his suit is compromised and I'm going to vent the atmosphere to give us a boost again." As asked Linda dragged John's unconscious form into the cockpit.

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"Now that Sarah has released us from the Covenant's electronic grip get us into a slingshot around the moon once the Spartans are back onboard. In the meantime, I think it's high time we gave our plasma turrets a field trial, target the nearest ships first and warm up

every turret we've got. Get the MACs charging as well, I want a firing solutions on their battle station from both MAC guns and prepare to launch both of our Shivas." ordered Captain Price as his bridge crew got back into the swing of not having an AI to control all the minor subsystems.

As the plasma turrets warmed the Covenant plasma harvested upon arrival was guided using the turret's magnetic coils and guided into a thin lance of plasma. Every turret on the ship opened fire and the lances speared into the closest Covenant destroyer and Carrier. The first shot dissipated the shield and the second carved through multiple decks before hitting the reactor in on destroyer and what must have been a key plasma line in a carrier as the destroyer exploded in columns of purple flames and the carrier lost all power and floated, dead in space. As the Covenant began to return fire it took every inch of maneuverability the Spirit of Justice had to even dodge some of the hits. Even so Price flinched as the list of damage was read out, fire on almost every deck, coolant pipes damaged, engines reduced to two thirds normal output and four plasma turrets destroyed.

When the news came in that the Spartans had returned Price pushed the engines as hard as the would go and shot off into the prearranged slingshot. Around halfway round the planet the Spartans reappeared on the bridge and Sarah was reinserted in the ship's mainframe. "Sarah", Price ordered, once we have come round the planet fire MACs and launch both Shivas and all archer missiles at the battle station, then sling us around the moon and get us into the slipstream, it's time to leave.

Whatever the Covenant had been expecting it clearly wasn't for the Spirit of Justice to come hurling round the planet at high speed, flames shooting from holes in the hull, the engines glowing red hot and two MAC guns opening fire on the followed by two nukes.

The MAC rounds smashed into the Mirage of Deceit knocking it out of its' stationary position. The first shot weakened the shield, the second punched through and smashed into the ring knocking it out of balance and towards the spire. The remnants of the ring crashed into the central spire just as the nukes arrived on the scene and detonated in a blinding white flash, vaporizing two huge chunks out of the spire. Then easily over a thousand archer missiles truck, despite their numbers being whittled down by pulse lasers a huge number hit the thinnest part in the crater left by the nukes and punched through yet more of the spire. Finally, the superstructure gave in and the spire split in half knocking through dozens of Covenant carriers, destroyers and battle cruisers. By the time the attack and its aftermath were over the battle station and the ships around it were smashed and in ruins.

Having finished what it was there to do the Spirit of Justice swung around the moon and jumped into slipspace away from the doomed planet.

****What, Is That?: October 25th 2542****

****Location: In Slipspace, Spirit of Justice****

It had been two days since the Spirit of Justice had jumped away from the doomed planet of New Eden. As they dropped out of slipspace

in an unknown star system the amount of damage the ship had suffered was clear. The spire where the observation deck had been was a stump of twisted metal, the hull was peppered with burnt holes and the engines were running well below optimal capacity. The ship looked like a wreck but her Captain knew one thingâ€¦ She had plenty of battles ahead of her. "Sir", called Sarah, "I'm picking up something strange on the far side of that gas giant, should I move to investigate?"

"Certainly, but keep the slipspace generator ready to go in case we need to leave." ordered Price.

As the ship came around the far side of the gas giant an incredible spectacle met the eyes of all who had access to an exterior camera or view screen. Spinning serenely in the heavens was a huge floating ring. It was massive, easily the same diameter as a moon or small planet, and the inside edge was covered in continents and blue water.

"What", asked Captain Price, half to himself half to his crew and Sarah, "The hell is that?"

6. Chapter 5

****Discovery Among The Stars: October 27th 2542****

****Location: Space above an unknown construct, _Spirit of Justice_****

"Sarah, bring us within range for our sensors to get some readings on that thing, I want to know what it is and more importantly if there are any life signs." ordered Price, dreading what would come up. "Yes Sir, approximately five minutes until we get in range, in the meantime, shall I run a system diagnostic to see what's actually working on what's left of this ship." replied Sarah, disappearing into the ships' systems to search for any damage.

After thirty seconds she came back to the pedestal with a look of serious concern on her face, "Sir", she began, "I've got good news and bad news, the bad news is that one of the MAC guns is going to need some work before we can fire it, five plasma turrets are out of commission, the engines are down to fifty percent of their usual power, we can't push the reactor at above 65% due to lost coolant and the underside is in tatters from the impact with the moon, we can't afford to take any more damage there. On the up side, life support is still fine, none of the computer links within the ship have been damaged and the reactor is still stable, we're almost out of Archer missiles and we have no nukes left, the one remaining MAC has plenty of rounds left and there is loads of plasma still hot to go."

"Well, at least there's some good news, eta to getting that ring within sensor range?" asked Price, "Approximately one minute and counting Sir." Sarah's statement was followed by silence as the crew waited to find out what they had found. The next time she spoke they had come in range, "I've started the scan but it could take time to run, in the meantime I'm going to create a holographic model of the ring using visible data and estimating the size until I have accurate data." she fell silent as she began constructing the hologram in the centre of the room before the eyes of the entire crew, all fell

silent as the mighty structure appeared. "Modeling complete Sir, thats a scale model of the ring, it should help us plan where to send out tro-." she was cut off mid sentence as the results from the scan came in and instantly factored into the model, increasing the detail tenfold. "Sarah, what were the results from the life scan?" asked Price, staring contemplatively at the slowly rotating hologram. "Very little life on the ring, none of human origin and as far as I can tell no Covenant life forms we've come across so far. There is something, it's small but it may be worth investigating."

"Sir", called the Ensign on sensors, "I'm picking up multiple inbound drones, profiles and energy signatures match the ones we came across on New Eden but I can't be sure with our damaged sensors."

"Damn." cursed Price, "Get target locks for the Archers, if any of them are close together try and kill a few with one hit, in other words we need to use the missiles we have left sparingly." The hologram of the ring zoomed out a little to show the Spirit of Justice as well as the inbound Sentinels. "Fire up the point defense turrets and get the Longswords out there to help mop up what the Archers can't hit."

From the viewports several vapor trails could be seen behind the Archer missiles as they sped towards the cloud of Sentinels. It became clear when the Sentinels were hit because, despite it being impossible to make out the Sentinels, the explosion marked the hits. "Sir, there are still thirty on the way, we got rid of half of them though." called a Ensign.

When the Sentinels got within range of the point defense turrets the high speed fire could be heard from decks below, along with the occasional flash of exploding Sentinels. The enemy group disappeared from the view screen as the shot under the ship. As the view screen showed a camera angle showing the belly of the ship the golden glow of their beams could be seen slicing through the weakened hull. "Captain, we have multiple hull breaches on the lower deck, fortunately no one was down there due to the risk the hull damage caused but I have now had to vent all atmosphere to those decks and lock them down to stop the fire spreading." explained Sarah. Just as she finished her sentence three Longswords could be seen exiting the hangar to engage the Sentinels. The Sentinels never saw them coming and the heavy machine guns mounted on the fighters quickly dispatched the remaining Sentinels.

"Okay, send the Spartans and Johnson to the surface to investigate the life signs and do a check on the areas for any signs of what this place is, I'll give them a wireless link to the ship so that you can access any terminals they find.", turning to the ship wide intercom he began issuing orders, "Spartans and Sergeant Major Johnson's squad report to the hangar bay and get ready to go ground side. I want you out there asap."

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When the Spartans arrived in the hangar it was bustling with activity, techs who had yet to be given specific jobs were tinkering with machinery and repair any damage the ships' complement of Pelicans, Longswords and ground vehicles may have sustained in action. The Spartans were forced to wait after grabbing shotguns and rifles as a tech who had been fine tuning systems on the Pelican, at

the request of the pilot, packed up and got out of their way. Once their pilot was onboard and strapped in the Spartans loaded into the troop bay of the transport, minus Fred who was still strapped down in the Med Bay to stop him rejoining operations before the severe burns on his chest could heal.

As the Pelicans lifted off and cycled out through the airlock the tension onboard was tangible. It was the first time any humans would have been down to the surface of the strange ring in recorded history, this lack of intel triggered alarm bells in the Spartans' minds at the potential dangers of landing in unknown territory.

There was silence as the Pelican descended through the atmosphere and approached the landing zone. Once it was low enough the loading ramp lowered and the Spartans leapt onto the ground below. They found themselves in what must have once been a beautiful landscape. The once green grass and trees were stained a sickly brown and the landscape was covered in a strange layer of soft, brown matter. The air was thick with strange floating spores and in occasional place there were freakish pulsating mounds that seemed to have something unpleasant residing within. "Keep your air filters on", ordered John, "We don't know what all these spores are from." Acknowledgment lights flashed green on his HUD and, carefully sweeping the landscape for danger, they moved off. The three were startled when Sarah's voice came over the comm, "You have walked past several of the life signs I detected, give a visual feed." asked Sarah. When she had the feed she was as confused as the Spartans. All she could see was the barren landscape with sick looking vegetation. Then she spotted one of the hideous mounds. "Have you investigate any of those things?" she asked, struggling to find suitable words for the weird bulges. "I'll check it out now." replied John, his voice laced with undertones of suspicion. As he got closer to the lump it seemed to pulse more and more violently. He reached out and touched the thing and suddenly it stopped pulsing and burst violently, knocking him backwards several feet. From the fleshy debris emerged the most freakish assortment of grotesqueries, they were shaped like small pointed pods, they skittered along on a number of tentacles, waving strange antennae with red fungal tips. As they swept towards John like a flood of flesh he felt, for the first time in longer than he could remember, fear.

Out of nowhere gunfire started and the things exploded in a huge chain reactions, splattering the area with bits of green flesh. "What the hell were those?" John asked half to himself half to the rest of his team.

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"Alright squad, we've been picked to go down to the surface of this ring and find out what the hell lives there. When we land I want everyone prepared for potential combat with unknown life forms, lock and load Marines, we're going in." Johnson roared over the squad comm. He was answered with a chorus of "Oorah's" as the Pelican descended through the atmosphere, a few minutes behind the Spartans.

"We're heading into an area where a high life density was picked up, I'll be dropping you off here and picking you up three hours from now." called the pilot as the Marines charged down the ramp and onto

an almost identical alien landscape to that the Spartans had entered. "Dotted around them were dozens of the strange bulging mounds. Johnson walked up to the nearest one and called the others over, "I guess", he began, "this thing must be what all the fuss is about", emphasizing his sentence by prodding the lump with the barrel of his rifle. The lump exploded knocking the Marines back to onto the floor. The flood of strange pods skittered towards them. Fear gripped the group and no one fired, the pods leapt through the air and with an array of screams from the Marines began latching themselves to the humans.

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"Sir, I've got more bad news, I'm picking up multiple inbound slipspace signatures at the edge of the system, the imprints on the slipstream suggest Covenant battle cruisers." warned Sarah, the bridge was filled with depressed mutters at the fact that they were being thrust yet again into a combat situation, this time against numerically superior foes in a ship that was badly damaged and low on weapons.

"Get the plasma turrets warmed up and get us as close as possible to the where they should enter normal space but still within comms range for our ground forces." ordered Price, his voice as stern as ever despite the situation. "Covenant ships arriving in three, two, one." counted Sarah, followed by a flash of light as three worm holes from the other dimension opened up and spewed out three battle cruisers. "Open fire!" ordered Price, his voice full of malice towards the alien vessels, "Then take shelter behind the ring to protect us from their plasma torpedoes." The seven remaining plasma turrets unleashed an array of plasma beams towards the enemy ships, still powered down from the jump, two of the cruisers bore the brunt of the attack and silently exploded in a spray of metal, bodies and purple flames, quickly extinguished by the vacuum.

The remaining battle cruiser sprang to life and chased of the damaged ship which had just destroyed two of its' brethren vessels. The plasma turrets along the ships lateral lines warmed and unleashed plasma torpedoes moving at high velocity towards the _Spirit of Justice_. The ship was already halfway around the ring by the time the torpedoes caught up with it, five slammed into the ring, melting through meters of the metal underside of the ring revealing the catacombs below its surface. The remaining torpedo hit the still relatively intact top half of the _Justice _and melted burnt into the hull, leaving it burning bright white from the intense heat.

The battle cruiser came to a halt, as if unwilling to risk damaging the ring. The _Justice _took the advantage and fled into the relative safety of the magnetic field generated by the gas giant, which would help keep Covenant plasma away due to it being guided by a magnetic field.

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As John and his team continued through the wasteland they came across more and more of the strange pulsing lumps, they steered well clear of them, now knowing what they contained. In the distance a structure rose above the clouds of spores and into the sky. It was similar in design to the structure they had entered and subsequently been chased from on New Eden, except this one was much taller and grand with a

huge semi-triangular spire.

It was a good hours hike across the desolate terrain until they arrived at the entrance to the structure, leading down into the ground and darkness. "Turn on your flash lights and switch to your shotguns, we're going down there to see if we can find any sort of terminal." ordered John. He was instantly rewarded with a rustled of movement and the shiny reflection of the torches against the wet, sticky ground.

They headed downwards into the bowels of the structure. Half way down they heard a strange roaring, inhuman groan in the distance. The hall stopped and looked around trying to determine the source of the strange sound, "We need to keep moving, we either don't want whatever that was finding us or we need to find it and get the upper hand on the situation." ordered John, trying to maintain an air of confidence in the face of an unknown threat, looming in the darkness. There was silence save for the sound of metal on metal as the Spartans walked down deeper into the gloom, shotguns rigid in their shoulders, fingers on the triggers.

Eventually the slope leveled out and opened up into a huge main chamber, all over the walls was the strange brown matter which had covered the ground on the surface and tendrils hung, dripping moisture from the ceiling. The walls were covered in the strange bulging tumorous lumps. The walls seemed to move with the sheer number of the pulsing things.

As the group passed through the massive room the atmosphere was tense with worry, fear and spores. Suddenly strange, roughly humanoid shaped lurched out of the gloom. The things were huge, easily the size of hunters and had a vicious spike for one arm, their abdomen was made up of several stalks but there were gaps allowing them to see through the body. What passed for a face was deformed and, like the pod forms, had strange red antennae which waved in the air. The of creatures group began a loping charge towards the Spartans, issuing strange guttural war cries and running forward like gorillas. "Open fire!" yelled John over the inhuman roars and opened fire with his shotgun into the centre of one of the creatures, it slowed a little and a thick green puss dipped out of the wound but the creature just kept coming. He was suddenly knocked off his feet by the creature but was instantly surrounded by an array of shotgun bursts and within moments they had dispatched his assailant. They then continued to hose the monstrosities with their shotguns until all that was left were mounds of green, puss drenched flesh lying on the ground.

"We're getting out of here, Spartans, retreat." ordered John and as a team they ran back through the room. As they beat a hasty retreat one of their shotguns brushed against a bulge by the door and it exploded releasing dozens of pods into the worlds. This one explosion started a chain around the room and the sound of popping bulges echoed around the room and hundreds of the pods skittered up the slope after the Spartans. By the time they saw the flood of pods behind them they had latched themselves onto Linda's armor and crawled up her back. One made it to her neck and sunk a tentacle into her spine, she cried out in pain and fell, instantly covered by the wave of pods. "No!" screamed Kelly as she tried to stop and help her friend but John grabbed her hand and pulled her on knowing that if they stopped to try and help they too would fall victim to the creatures.

Once they had got topside and back onto the alien wasteland they ran, and kept running, the pods had no hope of keeping up with two Spartans running at full tilt and they were quickly left behind. "I'll call the _Justice_", said John, "explain the situation and ask for immediate evac."

"What about Linda?" cried Kelly, badly affected by the loss of her life long friend. "We can't leave her!"

"We have to Kelly, we'll come back with reinforcements to try and find her later but for now there's no sense in all of us dying trying to save her." John ordered, his voice pained and his words trying to convince himself as much as Linda. By now Kelly had sat down on a rock and was trying to gather herself while John called in for evac. "I've got bad news", John said as he walked over, "The _Justice_ isn't answering, something must be happening in orbit. The good news is that I've detected Marine IFFs two kilometers up spin of us, we'll link up with them and work from there."

It was a long hike over the vile terrain to get to where the signal was coming from and the journey was spent in silent mourning for a fallen comrade and the possibly the best sniper in the UNSC. By the time the signal was showing as just over the hill they had been on the surface of the ring for eight hours without food or contact from command. They had found a natural stream to collect water from and had used two of their four water purifiers to make sure it was safe.

It was dark as they came over the crest of the hill and looked down into the dip below. Below them was the source of the IFF signal, but it wasn't the Marines— at least it wasn't any more. They were creatures similar to the ones that attacked them in the underground chamber but these looked as though they had once been human but were definitely not any more. They had pale green skin and red blood shot eyes, at least one of their arms was bent at a strange angle and bone stuck through the skin, more of the strange green puss mingled with red blood, from the space made by the broken arms tentacles and sharp hooks had grown.

"Jesus Christ, that must be what those pods do to humans." John thought out loud, "Kelly we're pulling out, if they're even half as dangerous as the big ones, we're screwed." as they crawled slowly backwards the same thought crossed silently across both Spartan's minds— was this what had happened to Linda.

Once they were a safe distance away John reevaluated the situation, "We're cut off from command, the Marines are now creatures and Linda is MIA. We should find somewhere to lay low for a while until we can link up with command, while we wait we can see if we can get Linda on the comm." taking one last look back at the ex-Marines they moved sadly on when suddenly Kelly realised something "John", she called, "There were only five Marines, I recognised one from Johnson's squad. That leaves three unaccounted for, maybe they're still out there."

"Your right", agreed John, "Keep your IFF monitor up to make sure we don't miss any survivors." Together they moved out making sure that none of the ex-Marines followed them. As they walked John pulled up a three dimensional map produced from Sarah's scan and studied the area

they were in for any structures that could prove a good place to lay low. The area they were in seemed to be void of any structures save the one where they had lost Linda, he scanned past it and only two kilometers beyond he found a tall structure with a platform at the top, providing a commanding view of the area. "Kelly, I've found the perfect place for us to go but it means we need to go past our original LZ and where we lost Linda", he said calmly, knowing Kelly would hate the idea of going past the place where she had lost one of her closest friends and he was shocked by her response, "Alright, maybe we'll see her on the way, maybe she'll be okay." she said, her voice full of hope, "Kelly, if we do see her assume she is a threat like those Marines unless we know otherwise." he ordered as they walked off the way they had come.

****Say What?: October 28th 2542****

****Location: Behind Gas Giant- Arkanna II, _ Spirit of Justice_****

"Sarah, is the battle cruiser making any move to follow us?" asked Captain Price, concerned for the safety of his badly damaged vessel and its' crew. "No Sir, but I have intercepted their communications channels and after finding out they were calling for reinforcements I blocked all comms from their ship, I think without them knowing what I've done" explained Sarah, worry that the ship's message may have got through to Covenant ears was evident in her voice, "Are there any chances that we may be able to get our long range comms and sensors operational? Without them we can't contact our ground teams without getting in range of the battle cruiser and we have no idea what is happening on the surface and-"

He was interrupted by Sarah, "Captain I'm sorry but I have an incoming communication coming from the ring, I don't know how it got to us with our comms in such a mess but should I patch it through?", Price sat for a moment, concern on his face, there was no known way that the message could be from his surface teams, leading to a very real chance that it would either be from the life forms detected on the surface or another, as yet unknown, source. "Patch it through to the main screen and run it through the bridge speakers, I want everyone here to hear it." As the main screen dissolved into static it then resolved into the a single glowing light with simple yet clearly alien patterns around it. Then a voice spoke, it clearly wasn't human yet it was speaking in clear english, "Greetings, I am _249 Shamed Diversion _Monitor of Installation 07, welcome Reclaimers I'm sending you a location for you to land on the ring, I must warn you not to deviate from the prearranged landing sequence due to a quarantine breach on this installation." the voice cut off and the bridge was plunged in silence as the central holographic display showing the ring came up with a line for the ship to follow, it was a line no human ship could follow since it came across the ring and sloped steeply down, clearly intending for the ship to come down horizontally. This was a difficult feat for any human ship let alone one as big as the _Justice_, it also ignored the fact that she was not designed to return in atmosphere after she was first space bound unless she was not going to be leaving again.

"Is there any way of contacting this Monitor to explain that we are not able to bring our ship in atmosphere?" asked Price, concern for the turn of events written clearly across his face. "I'm afraid that would be difficult Sir, seeing as our long range comms are out of

action and to use the short range would bring us back to the battle cruiser." explained Sarah.

"Damn, caught between a rock and a hard place, muttered Price, "Alright then, I want as many techs as is sensible working on improvising some long range comms equipment seeing as the old equipment was lost along with the observation deck." ordered Price. "Certainly Sir, I'll let you know when the work is complete."

"Sarah, I'm going back to my cabin for a rest, Lieutenant Shaw, you have the bridge, inform me of any important developments." called Price as he walked from the bridge. As he walked down the corridor to his cabin he was suddenly reminded of the fact that the whole time between their arrival at New Eden just a few days before and now he had kept himself going with power naps and liters of coffee.

As he staggered into his room he collapsed onto his bed and was asleep before he hit the pillow.

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He was awoken three hours later by the ship wide comm, "Would Captain Price please return to the bridge immediately." he sat up quickly and straightened his collar, Sarah's voice had sounded somewhat content so he headed to the bridge full of hope.

When he arrived the Maintenance Officer Macarthy was waiting for him, a pleased look on his face. "Sir", he began, "I've managed to rig the short range comm system so that it can either function as a long or short range comm, that means that we will need to switch it back and forth depending on our needs but it does mean you can contact the Monitor that contacted you."

"Thank you, please return to your station Macarthy, and if you could keep getting as many of the serious problems fixed I would be very grateful." replied Price, Macarthy turned after snapping off a salute and left the bridge. "Okay Sarah, have you been able to locate this _Shamed Diversion _and found us a way of contacting him?" he asked hopefully. Sarah took a minute to reply, clearly doing just that even as he spoke, "Yes, I've pinpointed his location in a large structure on a lone island on the ring. Should I attempt to open a link for you?" she asked.

"Yes give me a link", a comm channel appeared on the Captains person view screen signaling for him to begin, "_Shamed Diversion_, this is Captain Price of the UNSC ship _Spirit of Justice_, you contacted us earlier but we have trouble with our communications system. There is a serious problem with the landing orders you sent us, firstly our ship is incapable of the suggested maneuvers and secondly it is not meant to travel in atmosphere. Please respond." his message was followed with silence on the comm channel, either the Monitor hadn't got their message or it was ignoring them.

7. Chapter 6

****Back From The Dead: October 28th 2542****

****Location: Surface of Installation 07****

"Okay Kelly, it's my turn to go on watch duty, you've been on for hours, you need to take a break." John ordered. She reluctantly moved away from the edge of the tower they had taken refuge up and handed the binos to him. "I can't believe we've been here for hours and haven't seen anything move, it just seems too quiet." she murmured as she lay on the ground to get some sleep. As he looked down the binoculars he zoomed in on the horizon to check that Kelly hadn't missed something in her tiredness. As he scanned across he was rewarded for his efforts as he noticed a slight movement in the direction of the building they had lost Linda.

As he zoomed in as far as possible he instantly recognised the shape, it was mjolnir armor without any doubt. Assuming it was Linda she was moving with a purpose, proceeding across the wasteland with a sniper rifle in hand. "Kelly", he called, "Come here for a minute, check I'm not seeing things." She grumbled as she stood up and took the binos from him. As she scanned the horizon she suddenly noticed movement and after zooming in a huge grin came to her face, hidden by her visor, "It's Linda", she said, her voice ringing with joy at the thought that her friend was alive. "Remember Kelly, I may not be Linda anymore, be prepared for anything when I initiate contact with her be prepared for the worst." He was saying it as much for himself as Kelly, he had also gotten his hopes up, he keyed her on the comm and spoke, "This is Spartan 117, do you read me? What is your status?" There was a nervous silence as the figure stopped and then a voice both Spartans recognised came over the comm, "This is Spartan 058, is that you Chief? After the incident in the structure I thought I'd lost you." said Linda.

"Linda, as I'm sure you can understand we are very suspicious that you survived the being swamped so we need you to lay down your weapon and remove your helmet at the base of this tower before you come up." explained John, still not quiet trusting that the Linda they knew had survived. He watched as she came towards the tower and removed her helmet, her red hair was visible even from a distance as she placed her rifle, shotgun and pistol beside her helmet and headed up the tower. As she came through the entrance up onto the platform she put her hands behind her head and her face was expressionless. "Before I can fully accept it's you I need you to explain what happened after we lost you." John said, getting straight to the point, "Yes Sir", Linda began, "When those things swarmed over me I thought I was screwed, one of them found a weak spot in my armor and shoved in some sort of spike and injected me with something that paralyzed me for hours. I just lay there wondering whether you would come back for me but I knew you wouldn't be that foolish."

"Sorry Linda but that won't do, several Marines were attacked by those things and were turned into freakish pale skinned creatures with deformed limbs, why are you still human?" John asked, suspicious about her survival. "I really don't know, it was as if I was tasted but they didn't want me. I didn't know about the Marines but what they did do was excruciating."

"Okay", John said slowly, "I trust you for now but when we get back to the _Justice_ I'm getting you to medical to run some tests, we can't let whatever it is spread. I've been trying to get in contact with the _Justice_ for hours now but I haven't had any luck." As if on cue the radio filled with static and was followed by a voice, "Spartans, what is your status?"

****_249 Shamed Diversion_: October 28th 2542****

****Location: Behind Gas Giant- Arkanna II,_ Spirit of Justice_****

Sir, now we have comms back up should I try and contact our ground teams?" asked Sarah, "Yes, I want radio contact with Spartans and Marines asap." ordered Price. The atmosphere on the bridge was tense, it had been hours since they had been in contact with the ground teams and all they knew was that there was some sort of life on the ring and a quarantine breach of some sort. "Sir, I'm contacting the Spartans, I'll patch it through over the bridge speakers." said Sarah, her voice echoing relief that they had been able to contact the Spartans after so long in unknown territory, "Spartans, what is your status?" asked Price into the small comms device mounted on his command chair, "We're all still alive Sir, we've made contact with the unknown life it is unlike anything I've seen before, it has the ability to turn normal humans into deformed creatures with as yet unknown combat capabilities, Spartan 058 was attacked by the infection's physical manifestation and appears to have escaped unharmed, for unknown reasons. Requesting pick up asap to get her checked out in medical. Also, request for information concerning Spartan 104's condition." Spartan 117's voice came in strong over the speakers and there was silence as he related his experiences on the ring. "We'll send a Pelican down for you but Spartan 058 will have to wait. As for 104 he's completely recovered thanks to the dermacortic steroids and he'll be on the Pelican to pick you up. From there I have a new mission for you, I'm sending you and the Marines to what we believe is the location of some sort of control room and also the location of an AI that contacted us, we need you to find it. Good luck Spartan." as he cut the comm channel and sighed, "Sarah, get me comm link to anyone left on the Marines squad, preferably Johnson."

"Yes Sir, Johnson's IFF is one of the few still transmitting a signal, I'll patch you through." replied Sarah, the short wait was followed by Johnson's voice, "Sir, I've got bad news, we were attacked by some sort of pods they jumped onto some of my men before we could kill them. We lost six men, the rest of us are holed up in a cave we found, requesting permission for immediate extraction." He sounded tired and near the end of his tether, making Price regret what we would give the Sergeant in reply, "Sorry Sergeant Major I need you on the ground but I am giving you and your team a new mission. I'll send a Pelican to collect you and take you to what we think is the ring's control centre and you may also come into contact with an AI there. The Spartan team should already be there when you arrive. Good luck." he cut the comm link and got a sense of deja vu at sending both teams on identical missions. "Sir, I'm picking up more inbound slipspace ruptures above the ring, I'm still working out the numbers but my estimates are at least five hundred ships."

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Price, "Thats the biggest Covenant fleet ever seen, bigger than the one at New Eden, bigger than any of the glassing fleets even. What's the eta?"

"Any moment now Sir, that's the only reason I was able to pick it up at all." Sarah explained grimly, then as if on cue the fleet arrived. It was enormous easily over five hundred strong made up of carriers, destroyers, frigates, battle cruisers and corvettes. However,

dwarfing the entire fleet with ease, it was a mushroom shaped space station of huge proportions. "Sir, my initial scans on that space station shows that it is approximately 348 kilometers wide, 658 kilometers long and has shields, thick armor and three auxiliary reactors and one unknown for source the most of the station's power."

"We need to leave. Now. Sarah, recall all ground teams, we're getting out of here." ordered Price.

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"Okay, we're two clicks from the landing zone, get prepped to go." called the pilot to his four passengers. "Roger that." replied Spartan 117, his voice cold as ice.

They had been in the Pelican for just over one and a half hours after reuniting with Fred and the flight had been uneventful. Suddenly the Pelican rocked in the sky, "Covenant drop-!" yelled the pilot, panic evident in his voice until he was cut off by a plasma bolt that melted through the cockpit canopy and killed him.

The Pelican tumbled out of the sky spinning erratically until it hit the tree canopy below and tangled up in the vines and undergrowth and came to a stop with a shuddering halt as it impacted on the ground. "Is everyone okay?" asked John, concerned for his Spartans.

The responses he got from were an assortment of groans and grumbles as the Spartans pulled themselves from the wreckage of the crashed Pelican. Once they had pulled themselves and their weapons out they began to look around at where they had crashed. It was a jungly swamp and the smell of decay was so overpowering that they were forced to turn on their air filters. Sticking out of the filthy water were mangroves reach all the way up to the canopy, through which the other side of the ring would be visible if not for the Covenant fleet in the way. "Damn." John muttered as he noticed the enemy fleet for the first time, "Squad", he warned, "Looks like we've got company in orbit, better get to where we need to go quickly and get the mission done." as he finished giving his orders he brought up the map and silently thanked lady luck that they had got so close to the control room. He set a waypoint on the team's collective HUDs and they set off into the jungle.

As they progressed through the swamp a vague hazy shape appeared in the distance. It reminded him of the structure he had explored on New Eden yet this one was even more squat than that had been. "There's a structure ahead of us, we'll check it out, it may be a subsurface route to the control room, if you see any danger yell and we'll pull out." Acknowledgment lights flashed green and they moved into the building, instantly flicking on their torches.

Further into the structure the passage opened up into a relatively small room with some sort of console on one of the walls. As they walked up to it there was a burst of static over the comm and a voice began to speak, "I am _035 Mendicant Bias_, welcome to my prison, I have been monitoring you and your ship in orbit since your arrival here. The AI you seek at the control centre is no friend of yours, he wishes for you to activate this ring and destroy the Flood present here."

"Wait a minute", John stopped him, "What's so bad about destroying this Flood you mentioned? What is it? What's so dangerous about activating this ring?"

"I shall explain Reclaimer. One hundred thousand years ago my makers were locked in a brutal war with the Flood. The Flood itself is a parasitic life form, which I fear you have encountered since your arrival here, it takes over the body of a host and mutates it into whatever the Flood requires it to do. You are here in the early days of the infection so all you have seen are the combat forms but what you saw in the underground cavern, those were pure Flood. This ring was built to defeat the Flood but at a terrible cost. The only way to defeat the Flood was to starve it to death and so this ring is designed to do just that, it destroys all life within its' range with enough biomass to sustain the Flood. That, Reclaimer, would include you, your species, the aliens which you are at war with and any other living creatures." the AI explained, pain in its' voice as it related the events of ancient times. "During the war I betrayed the Forerunners and allied myself with the Flood, for this I was punished and I was split into eight parts. One section of me was placed on each Halo ring so that I would never again be whole."

"Wait a minute", said John, trying to process all the information, "If you betrayed the Forerunners how do we know you aren't still on the same side as the Flood?"

"Because, Reclaimer, I have been alone with my thought for over one hundred thousand years and in that time I have come to realise that I was wrong to betray my makers and now all I can do to make up for my sins is help you Reclaimer. Now, you must leave, my communication with you will no doubt have been alerted to my guards who will not hesitate to kill you."

"_Mendicant, _if you are telling the truth, and I will find out, thank you. You may well have saved the lives of every human there is. Goodbye." John called back as he ran from the structure. "Kelly, Linda, Fred, we need to get to the control room, find out if what that AI said was true, and fast." he said motioning up to the sky.

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As the Spartans ran into the structure that contained the control room they skidded to a halt as they heard a sound. It was clearly artificial and it seemed to be humming a strange, simple little song. "Who's there?" called John and suddenly the humming stopped. A strange ball with a green light at the front descended from above them, "Greetings Reclaimer, it is good to see that at least some of you made it down here to meet with me. We must talk, the aliens who arrived after you sent troops down to the Library and retrieved the Index, necessary for firing Halo. They are on their way here now but I fear they shall not surrender their prize easily. Would you please meet them upon their arrival and obtain the Index." the strange AI said.

"Look", John began, "Before we do any of that I need to know, is it true that Halo is designed to defeat the Flood by denying them their food? As inâ€| us?"

"Oh my", the AI floated backwards in horror, "Who told you this, I

have no record of any of you accessing the networkâ€¦" its' voice descended into silence as it rifled through the vast databanks until it came to the appropriate piece of data, "Reclaimers, how did you come to be speaking to the shamed one?"

"That's beside the point, is what he said true?" John countered, determined to discover the truth. "Whilst it is a crude way of describing my Installation what you have described is indeed the most basic of principles. Yes."

"Bastard." John said as he raised his assault rifle and opened fire, followed soon by Kelly and Linda. Under the combined fire the Monitor fell out of the air, its' circuits temporarily overloaded. "That thing said we would need to Index to fire the ring, we need to get it from the Covenant when they arrive." John ordered, "Linda, Fred, take up sniping spots, Kelly, you're with me, lets move out."

By the time the Spartans had taken up their positions they could make out the Covenant Phantom in the distance as it sped towards the control room. As it slowed to a stop above them and deposited three elites into the area, two wearing the characteristic armor of Zealots the other wearing a strange, ornate dark silver armor. It had a beak like section that went between the mandibles and extra protection on one soldier. As the group got closer they could make out their voices, "Forerunners be praised Arbiter, there is no sign of the human scum in this hallowed place."

"Be wary brother", the one in the special armor replied, "They may yet defile this sacred place." As they moved past John flashed his acknowledgment light green and two sniper rounds punctuated the air in quick succession, felling the two Zealots. The third elite ducked and took cover, narrowly missing the shot intended to kill it.

Again John flashed his acknowledgment light and together he and Kelly moved in, shotguns tight in their shoulders, to dispatch their foe. As the came behind where the elite had dived they saw there was nothing there. Suddenly behind them they heard the snap hiss of an energy sword activating and they both leapt out of the way as the blade was brought down through where they had been moments before. As he tumbled to the floor John spun around and opened fire with his shotgun, the blast hit the elite square in the chest, knocking out its' shields. With nowhere left to run he felt the intense heat as the elite swung at him with the energy sword, he tried to spin to one side but the blade caught his arm, melting through the thick armor and slicing into his skin. The pain was intense but he forced himself to pull up the shotgun, as he did so and pulled the trigger he felt the blast leave the barrel and smash into the face of the elite, blowing its' head off.

"That was close", he muttered, "Is everyone okay?" he asked over the comm, he got three green status lights and he got to his feet nursing his wound. He leant down to examine the body of the fallen alien. On the belt he saw a strange alien looking T-shaped device, clearly not of Covenant design, he grabbed it and called the others over. "This must be the Index _Diversion_ mentioned, he said he needs it to activate the ring so we need to get it out of here." John ordered, already jogging off towards the jungle, "We need to get back to the structure where _Bias_ was and try and speak to him, I want to know more, or in the least we can hide there. In the meantime we need to try and get back in contact with the _Justice_, lets move out!"

The four Spartans charged off the way they had come before
Diversion could get his systems back in order and peruse them.
"John", Fred called, "If the Monitor was able to track those Covenant
with the Index won't he be able to track us"

Good point, we'll get to the Pelican and put it inside the reactor
compartment, that keeps radiation in so it should be able to mask the
signal but we need to get there asap." John ordered as they broke
into a run to get to the Pelican. Upon arrival they found the crash
site being inspected by a Sentinel, they quickly dispatched it and
crawled into the remains of the dropship. Once they had put the Index
into the reactor compartment they prepared to move on, "Fred", John
ordered, "I need you to stay here and guard the Index, stay inside
the wreckage so a passing Sentinel won't spot you but if one does
find you, engage it, contact me and defend the Index until we get to
you."

They moved off, once again just the three of them, to go and consult
Bias, if he was still where they had met him. The structure was
swarming with Sentinels when they arrived, five outside the entrance
and the glow of lights from another six inside. "Linda, stay back and
cover us, Kelly we'll sneak up on them with our shotguns and take
them out." Acknowledgement lights winked on and they moved into
positions in silence. Once John and Kelly were in position John
opened fire, wrecking one Sentinel instantly as the firefight began.
As he ducked into a roll to dodge one of the searing beams he heard
Kelly's shotgun firing and the crack of Linda's sniper rifle. He
turned back and continued firing at the Sentinels but they had all
risen out of range of the shotguns.

He unslung his rifle and suddenly felt a surge of pain through his
injured arm as the already melted armor which had by now hardened was
melted once again by one of the Sentinels' beams, he collapsed to the
floor in agony, unable to move from the sheer pain. The sounds of
battle around him faded into silence as he lapsed into pain induced
unconsciousness.

****The Final Solution: October 28th 2542****

****Location: Behind Gas Giant- Arkanna II, _Spirit of
Justice_****

"Sarah, any sign of that fleet taking any notice of us yet?" asked
Price, still concerned at the lack of Covenant activity. "No Sir,
they still seem to be taking no notice of us, I suspect we're too
small a threat for them to bother."

The fleet had been in system for two hours without bothering to even
send a probe in their direction. "What about comms? Any luck getting
through to our ground teams?" Again he got a negative response, there
was a minute of silence on the bridge before he spoke again, "Do we
still have any Clarion drones left? We could try sending one to the
side of the fleet to give as a clear transmission around them."

"Yes Sir, we have one drone left, launching now, I will inform you
when it's in place." there was silence on the bridge as they watched
the small drone drift past a fleet capable of destroying it with a
single shot. "Sir, the drone is in position to give us a clear comm
channel around the enemy fleet. Opening a comm line to the Spartan

team now."

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"John! John!" the sounds seemed far off as he awoke and suddenly remembered where he had been before he fell unconscious and bolted upright until suddenly he felt the pain lance down his arm and he collapsed back to the ground with a yell. "Careful John, your arm's badly burnt, you'll need to be careful." chided Kelly.

"What's the situation, are those Sentinels eliminated?" he asked as he slowly and carefully got to his feet, "They're all gone, after you passed out Linda went crazy and fired her rifle faster than ever, every shot hit, I was just left to mop up the ones inside the structure." Kelly explained, they moved into the structure as they spoke and within moments they had found the terminal where they had first spoken to Mendicant Bias. As John pressed buttons on the terminal Bias began to speak again, "I've been monitoring Halo's network", he explained, "you three have caused a lot of trouble for Shamed Diversion, where have you put the Index, I lost the signal from it not long ago." he asked.

"It's safe, for now", explained John, "I don't know how secure you are so I won't tell you where it is but I need to know, what do we do now that the monitor can't fire Halo."

"You must destroy this ring", Bias instructed, his voice filled with grim determination, "To do so you will need to weaken a key location on this ring. The area where you fought the Flood must be destroyed, they have weakened that part of the ring and that is where you must strike. First you will need to deactivate Halo's shield in that area, normally there is no shield but that area is protected now that the Flood have infected some of your species in that area. Once the shield is down you should be able to open fire from your ship and break through enough of the ring to destabilize it and that should cause it to rip itself apart.", explained Bias, "You must leave now, there are a great many Sentinels coming here seeking to kill you. Destroy the shield, destroy Halo." he called after them as they ran from the structure in the direction of the Flood controlled area.

As they returned to the crashed Pelican they told Fred what they had learned. As they prepared for the long journey, leaving the Index in the Pelican where its' signal wouldn't be visible to give their location away, the radio came on with a hiss of static, "Spartan team, this is Captain Price, I need a sit rep."

"We met with an AI called Mendicant Bias, the upshot of which was that we cannot let Halo be activated, we have captured an object known as the Index and hidden to make it impossible for Halo to be fired. We now going to move back to the area where we first came across that infection, now known to be called the Flood. We will destroy a shield protecting the area and once we have done that we need you to fire on that part of the ring to weaken it enough for it to tear itself apart."

"Okay Spartan, I trust your judgment, we'll send a Pelican to extract you and get you where you need to go asap. Good luck."

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It was half an hour before the Pelican arrived and when it did they were greeted by a man they had assumed dead, "Hop in Chief, we got plenty of room!" yelled Johnson from the ramp of the Pelican. Once they were all onboard and the Index was in the Pelican's reactor case John asked the question that had been buzzing in his mind since Johnson appeared, "Sergeant, how come you're here? I thought you were MIA."

"I was but not any more", explained Johnson, "After the Pelican came to pick me and my men up we began the journey to the control room, our Pelican was damaged by a Phantom and we had to go to ground. We spent a while in the middle of nowhere while the pilot fixed the bird. By the time we headed off and got to the control room we found it empty save for a few elite bodies outside. Not long after we arrived we got a call from the Captain ordering us to come and pick you up and get you to where we started."

The rest of the flight was spent in relative silence once the Spartans had explained what happened to them since they hit dirt ten hours ago. When they arrived in the area they needed to get to the pilot called back, "We're entering the shielded section now, hang on." As the Pelican went through the shield all lights and power vanished from the craft and it plummeted out of the sky until it crashed, nose first, into the Flood matter which coated the land. After the crash the four Spartans and three Marines pulled themselves out of the crashed craft and looked at their surroundings. In the distance they could make out the structure where they would be able to deactivate the shield, "Okay", John called out, "Sergeant, you and your men stay here with the Pelican and get it out of the ground and ready to get us out of here, Linda, stay with them. Fred, Kelly your with me, we're going to get into that structure and take down the shield."

As the three Spartans began the walk to the shield control room there was silence until, in the distance, they could make out movement. Once they had zoomed in on their face plates they could make out the shapes of the five missing Marines and four Flood Pure Forms. No warning was necessary as all three had seen the enemy forces, "Engage." John said simply over the comm followed by two green lights. Once they were in range they all dropped to one knee unleashing a hellish rain of gunfire onto the hideous creatures. The fire felled two Marines and injured one of the Pure forms. As the enemy got closer they switched to shotguns and Kelly threw a grenade into the mix. The explosion blew the leg off one Marine and an arm off another but they hopped and ran on regardless. The shotgun blasts blew chunk out of the remaining Marines and two of the Pure forms. The final one lurched into battle and drew back one spike appendage and swung it up, knocking Kelly flying through the air and landing with an earth shuddering thud. Fred and John both hit the creature in the back with their shotguns, forcing the creature onto one knee when a single shot came out of nowhere and blasted through what passed for its' face. Linda's acknowledgment light flashed green, confirming that she had felled the beast at one kilometer.

They pushed on to the building, careful not to touch any of the explosive lumps and release yet more of the infectious Flood. As they neared the building they could see spores pouring out of every entrance to the building and slowly floating through the air. Once they began to descend down the ramp into the structure terrifying

sounds emanated from below them, the sounds of inhuman wails, screams, cracking bones and strange dripping and squelching. The walls were covered in Flood biomass and the explosive bulges. The deeper they went the thicker the spores became until suddenly the tunnel opened up into what they realised was the another part of the same huge chamber they had found themselves in earlier, this time, however, things were different. In the middle of the room was a huge lump of biomass with tentacles which slid towards the Spartans slowly across the dank ground. Then, the scale of the problem was revealed, a huge maw appeared out of the mass and stared at them for a moment before it spoke, "_This is not your grave, but you are welcome in it." _The voice was deep and rasping, it spoke in English but it was clearly an alien tongue. "What is _that_" Kelly whispered over the comm, the creature leaned in towards her and spoke again, foul gases pouring from it's maw, "_I? I am a monument to all you sins."_ It spoke slowly and menacingly, the tentacles suddenly shot forward and grabbed them before they could fight back. It lifted them up into the air and began to squeeze them, they were all afforded some protection by their armor but soon it became excruciating as they were crushed by the tentacles, until suddenly the creature stopped and dropped them to the ground. Flood mass grew up around them as they were encapsulated by it up to the waist. Things seemed bleak as the mass continued to grow up around them until suddenly a grenade appeared out of nowhere followed by a rocket streaking overhead, all three twisted around to see Linda stood at the entrance, launcher smoking having just launched the rocket. Both grenade and rocket had hit the creature in the centre of its' mass blasting a huge hole. The biomass around their legs began to retreat as the creature fled back into the shadows. "Thank God!" Kelly called, seeing their savior, Linda nodded and ran over to them to check if they had been injured. After a quick check it was clear they all had internal bleeding to some degree, since Kelly's was the worst she returned to the Pelican with Linda while John and Fred pushed on towards the controls for the shield. They were wandering through a haze of spores, unable to see three metres ahead of them until suddenly a faint glow could be seen in the distance, "The terminal." John breathed, at last they had found it, as they approached he reached out and pressed a button on the terminal and the text morphed into English. He deactivated the shield and they turned to run back in the direction they had come. When they were around halfway across the room the gravelly, demonic voice returned, "_Did you think me defeated?"_ the voice roared as tentacles shot out of the darkness and smashed into the two Spartan and denting their armor. John fired his shotgun at the tentacle rearing up above him and blew the tip off, the thing let loose and almighty roar and the tentacle retreated, squirming as it went. In the meantime Fred had drawn his combat knife and begun slicing the tentacle that was trying to crush him into slivers.

As they leapt to their feet they charged at top speed towards the door when suddenly all around them the Flood spewing bulges exploded, spraying the area with Flood matter and unleashing a tidal wave of the infectious pods.

When they reached the surface they looked around for the Pelican it seemed to have left when suddenly it lowered down back open from above them, "Command has a plan!", called Linda, "We're outta here!"

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"Captain!" called Sarah, "The Spartans have completed their mission and require immediate extraction but that means we have to deal with that fleet." Price was silent, contemplating what they could do, "Sarah, calculate a slipspace jump that will bring us in from the far side of the ring, we will accelerate from there to as fast as the engines can manage, pick up the Spartans as we pass through and release everything we've got onto the ring."

"Aye Captain, calculations in progress, charging slipspace drive." confirmed Sarah, there was bustle on the bridge as the crew prepared for the short jump, sudden exit into the view of the Covenant armada and the firing of every turret on the ship. The ship moved forward as a swirling wormhole into the other dimension appeared and the ship vanished into the void.

A moment later it reappeared on the far side of the ring and began accelerating. "Sarah, prepare to open fire and accelerate once the Spartans are onboard." the bridge was hushed as the Covenant ships lateral lines began to build up to fire on the Spirit of Justice, "Sir, Spartans are onboard, accelerating and locking onto the unshielded section of the ring." Moments later there were thuds audible through the hull as the MAC opened fire, smashing into the ring and punching through layers of metal, then the archers hit and cleaved rock and metal from the superstructure. The onslaught of explosions was followed the gleaming lines of plasma from the remaining turrets on the Justice, the beams hit in multiple places and were guided along as the ship moved overhead. The ring began to flex as the weakened section succumbed to the damage, then in a sudden twist the huge damaged section of ring was turn away. The ring fell out of balance with a huge piece suddenly missing, the remaining part began to bend inwards on itself until suddenly it gave way and split in half. The now shredded sections of ring drifted towards the Covenant fleet just as it opened fire the Justice. Plasma left glowing streaks along the hull as they hit and melted away sections of armor.

"Captain, slipspace jump calculated, jumping as soon as the capacitors are full." there was an aura of fear on the bridge as the temperature soared from the plasma bombardment the ship was under. Suddenly the wormhole opened up ahead of them and the Spirit of Justice glided into the rift away from the doomed ring and the Covenant fleet.

****Epilogue: October 29th 2542****

****Location: In slipspace, Spirit of Justice****

"Sir, I'm bringing us out of slipspace now as per the Cole Protocol." advised Sarah as the ship shuddered from the sudden deceleration and the stars reappeared around the ship as it returned to normal space. "Okay Sarah, recalculate jump straight to Earth and charge the capacitors."

"Uh, Sir, there may be a problem," she said sheepishly, "it appears the slipspace drive was damaged by the plasma we were hit by and we are unable to return to slipspace."

"Damn!" cursed Price, slamming his fist into the arm of his chair, "Alright, get the entire crew into cryo, set up an automated distress beacon and set us on a course for Earth."

"Sir?" she asked, but shut her mouth as he threw her a look. The crew of the Spirit of Justice got into the cryo pods and the ship shut down to her most basic of functions as she began her long journey home through the dark void of space

8. Chapter 7

****Home Run: October 18th 2552****

****Location: Edge of the Sol System, Spirit of Justice****

As the cryo pod swung open the world appeared hazy for Captain Price as he remembered the events that had led to his going into cryo sleep. After their battle at the Halo ring they had jumped away but after they dropped out of slipspace it was revealed that they were incapable of making another jump. He had set the ship on course for Earth and put the whole crew into cryo sleep. Since he was awake he assumed that they must have arrived at their destination afterâ€¦ He didn't know how long. He began coughing from the cold air around him, he coughed up the surfactant. The foul goo dribbled out of his mouth and into the grill below. "Status?" he managed to choke out to Sarah. There was no response, concerned, he climbed out of the pod and took a shower, shaved and got dressed after his long period in stasis.

Once he was ready he left the cryo bay marched to the bridge. Everything was covered in a thin layer of dust. "How long have we been out?" he wondered out loud to himself. He sat down in his command chair and activated the systems they had shut off when they began their journey. "Sleep well Captain?" Sarah's voice emanated from the bridge speakers, "Yes, what's our status, what's the date and why weren't you up when I was?"

"It's very simple Sir", she explained, "When you went into cryo I sat, bored in the systems for a month before I began to realise I had no idea how long we would be out there for, so, rather than just waiting for myself to descend into rampancy, I linked the controls for my power systems to the ones we had shut down so that when I turned off the systems it shut me down as well. I've been in the AI equivalent of cryo stasis for as long as you have but I set up a subroutine that would wake you up when we neared Earth and soâ€¦ Here we are." She seemed very pleased with herself as she stood on the holo projector. "According to my calendar the date today is the 18th October 2552."

"2552!" yelled Price, "We've been in cryo for ten years?" he sank back into his chair as he realised what it meant, the war could have ended and if it ended the way it began they could be arriving at a ball of glass. "Bring every system back online, get the crew out of cryo including all combat personnel, we don't know what we'll find at Earth." he explained grimly. The next hour on the bridge was passed in almost permanent silence as both AI and Captain examined what had happened onboard in the last ten years. Slowly, the bridge crew began to trickle back in to their stations as they were awoken from cryo and got ready to return to their stations.

As the ship approached Earth the entire crew was defrosted and ready to go. Suddenly the radio flared to life and an unknown voice came

over the speakers, "This is Admiral Terrence Hood IC of the Cairo Orbital Platform, your ship's transponder is showing you as being the UNSC _Spirit of Justice_ _Phoenix Class Colony Ship, can you please confirm, that ship went missing without trace after it went to investigate New Eden ten years ago."

Price straightened his collar his collar as he prepared to speak, "This is Captain John Price of the UNSC _Spirit of Justice_ your sensors are correct this is the same ship which went missing ten years ago, our slipspace drive was damaged during a battle above an unknown alien installation, requesting permission to dock and refit the vessel asap."

"Definitely granted", Hood said, the shock obvious in his voice that the ship had returned and the crew were asking for a refit not a break, "Dock with the refit station Hephaestus, we'll get you ready to go asap, welcome back Captain."

****It Followed Me Home: October 19th 2552****

****Location: Orbit above Earth, _Spirit of Justice_****

The _Justice_ had arrived at Earth the previous day but the fleet needed every possible ship ready to defend the planet so despite the extensive damage to the ship she was ready to go in less than a day. In the time they had been back the crew had been debriefed and been told the situation. Reach had fallen just over a month ago with only a few survivors, Earth was the most important planet left under the UNSC's control and the Covenant had discovered the location of the planet by getting hold of an unsecured navigational database onboard and ONI ship that had been docked on one of Reach's orbital stations. Earth's home fleet had been bulked up with every ship to spare and the _Justice_ made an impressive addition to the huge fleet, being the only colony ship still space worthy.

At the debriefing Price had retold the tale of the events between the _Justice_ leaving space dock at Reach ten years earlier up to their arrival in the Sol system. Hood had been stunned at the scope of what the crew had been through and was even more so after they told him that they wished to continue active duty. He did, of course, accept their request since the fleet needed all the help it could get.

For the crew it was something of a let down, having to guard Earth. They simply sat there at their stations monitoring traffic, keeping an eye on the now fully repaired sensors and the telemetry from the _Justice_, now as good as new. For a crew that had seen so much combat in such a short space of time it was an impossible situation.

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The clock on the ship ticked over another minute, "20th October" though Price to himself, they'd been back two days guarding the human race's last bastion and there hadn't even been a whisper of Covenant activity. There had been medals all round and a small celebration aboard the Cairo station that they had made it back but other than that it had been dull.

"Sir!" called Sarah, "I've got an incoming message from Lord Hood on the Cairo, it's marked urgent." Sarah's avatar vanished from the holo

projector and was instantly replaced by a small image of Lord Hood, "Captain", he began, "Our long range sensors have detected inbound slipspace ruptures, it looks like a surprisingly small Covenant fleet, just fifteen ships. Be ready to go to immediate battle stations, as one of the most heavily armed ships here you're being sent in first along with a few other ships to try and knock as many of the bastards as possible before they get near us."

"Yes Sir." responded Price, without hesitation, "Sarah, bring us up to combat alert and move us in the direction of the inbound slipspace ruptures, charge the MAC, warm up the plasma turrets and get an estimated lock for Archer pods A through D." he ordered, glad to be back fighting the Covenant that had left his crew in interstellar space for ten years. "MAC charging, plasma turrets warming and estimated lock obtained." replied Sarah, her voice sounding gleeful. Suddenly the slipspace ruptures opened into swirling wormholes and the fifteen ships emerged, one super carrier, one carrier, eight battle cruisers and five destroyers. "Open fire. One MAC round for each for any two destroyers, six plasma lances for each carrier and unleash the Archers between two of the battle cruisers." Price ordered, the Justice shuddered from the firepower she was unleashing, the MAC rounds shot forth and knocked into two of the destroyers sending them spinning out of control from the impact of the super dense MAC rounds. The plasma turrets charged but just before they could unleash their hellish fire on the carriers three of the enemy ships suddenly came to life, two battle cruisers moved in between the plasma lances and the carriers, the first two shots hit and destroyed their shields, the other blasted through and carved the ships up into super heated slabs of metal.

The carriers hot out from under the debris created by the exploding cruisers and headed straight for Earth. The defense platforms opened fire on the carriers but they slowed and allowed battled cruisers to take the hits. The accelerated under the defense platforms straight into orbit above the planet. The destroyers and remaining battle cruisers opened fire on the home fleet and orbital platforms. The hellish fire hit the platforms turning them into molten slag heaps and melted through the ships they hit. The remaining platforms in range returned for, the super MAC rounds shuddered through space straight for the enemy fleet. When they hit they crushed any ships in their way, knocking them apart and sending them careening out of control and into other ships. Within ten minutes of the veritable firefight twelve MAC platforms had been melted into pieces and five frigates had been lost. However, the only ships left from the enemy fleet were the supercarrier and carrier which had gone into geosynchronous orbit above the city of New Mombasa, two battle cruisers and a destroyer.

"Captain Price, this is Lord Hood, please respond." Hood's voice came over the bridge speakers, "Sir, this is Price." he said into the mic, "What are your orders?"

"We can't open fire on those carriers, if they move then we'll just end up hitting the planet, I want you to send in your Spartan team to take out one of the enemy ships from the inside. The other one will be dealt with by several ODST squads. Launch those Spartans in drop pods, the carriers' are down due to electrical conditions in the atmosphere so they should be able to punch into the hull. Good luck." as Hood signed off the comm Price turned to the ship's comm system, "This is Captain Price, Spartan team please report to the ship's drop

pod bay and prepare for immediate departure to the Covenant carrier, you will be briefed on arrival."

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"You heard the man!." yelled John, "Lets get our gear ready to go asap." they all grabbed close range weapons for use in the close quarters of the enemy ship along with rifles and ran through the corridors of the _Justice_ towards the drop pods. John was anxious, it was the first time they had been in combat since they had been given their new, shielded armor and this was an equivalent to a road test.

Once they arrived they were greeted by Sarah's avatar, she looked worried. "Spartans", she nodded, "You have been selected by Lord Hood for a mission which could save Earthâ€| for now. You will be dropped from the _Justice_ in drop pods into the Covenant carrier below, from there you will move to the ship's reactor and overload it, then get to the hangar and get a ride out before it blows. Good luck."

"Lets get in these pods and show the ODSTs how it's done!" whooped Fred as they leapt into the pods and strapped down their weapons and buckled into the crash seats. Once they were all in the pod rack swung out over the gap in the ship's hull designed for dropping pods from and it locked in place. "Dropping in five, four, three, two, oneâ€| Good luck Spartans." Sarah said through the comm as the pods began their descent towards the carrier. As they neared the carrier they could see the pulse laser turrets on the carrier trying to shoot them down but the pods were moving too fast to track them successfully.

The pods slammed into the hull at breakneck speed and smashed through into a large storage room within the ship. Thanks to their training with the pods the Spartans all landed on target and within minutes they had met up and were prepared to begin their assault. They were about to move out when an alien voice came through the ship's speakers, it spoke in alien tongues but the new software in their armor translated it into English, "The human vermin was not known to be here brothers, stand by for slipspace jump, fear not, we shall return and punish the humans for this deception." The Spartans looked at each other realising what was happening. "John, what are we going to do?", asked Kelly, "If they jump we'll be stuck onboard a Covenant super carrier with no way of getting back to Earth."

There was silence among the three as they realised the gravity of the situation. "We need to get to the bridge and take control of this ship to stop it getting away or to bring it back if it does." The other Spartans flashed their acknowledgment lights and they moved off into the corridors.

****We Have Aâ€| Situation: October 19th 2552****

****Location: In Slipspace, Covenant Supercarrier _Glorious Redemption_****

As they left the storage room John looked back out through the holes they had made, the space outside was filled with stars, "Good", he thought, "at least that means we haven't entered the slipstream yet." The group continued down the hall heading towards the centre of the ship, the assumed location of every Covenant bridge. They were

approaching what they hoped was the bridge when suddenly the ship lurched forwards at high speed. Assuming the ship had taken a hit of some kind they pushed on. The door in front of them slid open. On the other side were three Zealots, they drew their energy swords and charged into battle. The lifted their swords up and prepared to cut down the Spartans, Kelly and John leapt to one side, Linda fired her rifle into the energy sword of one elite, slowing it down, Fred was left with nowhere to go and the middle Zealot lunged for him when suddenly it's head exploded in a spray of blood, covering the area in alien brain. The two remaining Zealots looked behind the Spartans to the source of the shot but the temptation to finish off the Spartan first was too great one lunged at John who had by now drawn his shotgun, he pumped the slide and fired at the elite, knocking down its' shields and forcing it to fall backwards. He fired again into the elite's chest, blowing open the ribcage and covering the floor in a slowly expanding puddle of purple blood.

The final elite recognised it was outgunned and outnumbered, it turned around snarled back at them and fled. The Spartans finally had a chance to look behind them at their savior. Standing behind them, sniper rifle smoking was an ODST. "Trooper, what are you doing here this carrier was meant to be dealt with by us." John said sternly to the soldier. "Sorry Chief, I'm Corporal Edmunds my pod was hit by pulse lasers and was sent spinning off course, I was left with a simple choice, I could plummet past this carrier into open space and die cold and alone or I could join you here. I chose the second option." John sighed to himself knowing that the ODST had a point but his presence would endanger them all, "Okay, we'll do our best to keep you covered but you've joined us on one of the most important and high risk operations of the war." John explained, then turned around and the group of five headed off into the bowels of the supercarrier.â€|

After what seemed like ages they came to a door which was different to the others they had come across and had strange Covenant calligraphy above the entrance. As the Chief focused on it his armor detected his gaze and processed the symbol, giving him a translation. "This is the bridge", he called to the others, "Kelly, get working on opening it, Corporal, you cover our six, Fred and Linda, when she gets it open we throw in grenades and storm the room, kill everything you see unless I order otherwise."

There were several tense minutes as Kelly fiddled with the key pad trying to open the door to the bridge. "I've got it!" she called over her shoulder. Fred and John grabbed grenades from their belt as the door opened and threw them in, they grenades exploded killing three elites and a grunt instantly. There were four elites and two hunters who turned around to see what the commotion was. The elite wearing white armor on the central platform drew an energy sword and roared a battle cry and every other elite on the bridge brought up plasma rifles and opened fire. The two hunters charged into battle bringing their shield and fuel rod cannons to bear. There were four rapid cracks from a sniper rifle as Edmunds opened fire, the shots found every visible chink in the hunters' armor and they fell under the barrage. The Spartans hosed the remaining elites with gunfire and they didn't have a chance once Edmunds' joined with his rifle.

They walked onto the blood soaked bridge and examined the controls. All Spartans had been given basic training with Covenant systems and the armor's translation software made it relatively simple for them

to find the controls for the slipspace drive. Just as they were discussing whether it would be worth letting the ship get to where they Covenant had set it go when an energy sword appeared out of thin air through Edmunds' chest. The cloaked elite withdrew its sword and chuckled a guttural laugh, "I am back to avenge my brothers." it roared through some kind of translator of its own and lunged towards John, he ducked below the burning blade when suddenly a sniper shot hit it square in the back knocking it over. John pulled out his pistol and shot the creature in the back of the head. Edmunds groaned from the floor, blood was spreading around him, he had removed his helmet and his face was deathly pale. "Tell my friends, I saved the life of humanities' greatest hero." he choked out as he exhaled his last breath.

Ten minutes later the ship dropped out of slipspace in the location the Covenant had input. What the Spartans saw on the bridge's view screen was stunning, before them was a huge fleet, just sat in space. The ships were like nothing they had seen, they had strange geometry that matched neither Covenant or human designs. "Forerunner" John murmured as he recognised the style in which the ships were designed. Before them lay a Forerunner fleet made up of twenty five ships.

****By The Gods: October 19th 2552****

****Location: Unknown, Covenant Supercarrier _Glorious Redemption_****

"John", Kelly called, "I've tried hailing those ships but I just got an automated message back. It says that the fleet is currently in lockdown, to reenale the fleet the command ship must be reactivated, from there the rest of the fleet can be remotely controlled, to a point. This must be what they Covenant came here for, a fleet that would crush Earth's fleet in minutes. We need to beat them to the command ship but they all look the same."

They stared out across the alien ships, John's mind nagged at him, as though there was something he knew but couldn't remember. "We need to get to the hangar", he ordered, "Take a dropship and try to identify the command ship before the Covenant do. Kelly are there any hangars which show little enemy presence?"

"Yes Sir, there's one directly down the hall way on the other side of the bridge, it leads to the Captain's private docking bay, systems show a Phantom is currently docked, I'll try and unlock it." She stood over the console as minutes dragged by until suddenly a holographic figure appeared over the console, "I am UNSC AI third generation smart AI Kalmiya Service Number KMA-3956-2891-528, thank you for releasing me from my electronic prison. When Reach fell the Covenant invaded Castle Base and captured my data matrix, I locked myself down so that only a human would be able to get me working again." The AI explained, "I understand you are going in search of the Forerunner command ship, in my time outside my self imposed lockdown I've accessed the ship's systems and located all data referring to this fleet. The ship you're looking for can only be identified from one of the other Forerunner ships. You'll need to get to one of those ships asap. By the way, could you please extract my matrix from the console next to you, your new armor should have a slot in the back of the helmet where you can put my matrix, I can come with you and help you." The AI had asserted herself quickly

leaving John little choice, he leant down and pulled the data matrix out and felt around the back of his helmet, he found the slot and inserted the matrix in. He felt an ice cold presence flood through his mind and the sound of the AI's voice came in over his speaker, "It's nice to be back in a human system, far more logically put together."

"Lets move." John ordered and the four Spartans moved out of the bridge towards the dropship's hangar.

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When they arrived in the hangar the dropship was hovering above them, it was heavily modified, the plasma turret mountings appeared to have been replaced with the turrets from a Wraith tank and the whole thing seemed to have thicker armor than the average Phantom.

The group walked into the grav lift and shot up into the craft. Once inside Fred and Linda took control of the two turrets while Kelly and John ran through to the cockpit to get it moving. After a minute they had worked out the controls and lifted off from the hangar and launched into space. "Head for the nearest ship." John ordered motioning to one on the view screen, "I would advise against that one, that ship was the one selected by Covenant forces, may I suggest this one." Kalmiya's suggested, highlighting one of the ships in the centre of the fleet. "Good idea, Kelly, you know what to do." She angled the dropship towards the selected ship and headed for it at top speed.

As they drew closer they could make out more detail in the ship and what appeared to be a hangar became visible. Kelly brought the dropship in on an approach and slowly brought it into the hangar. Once they had exited they examined the interior. It was all made of a strange grey alloy, clearly not titanium, and had strange patterns inscribed across the surface. On one side was a small door leading to the rest of the ship, next to the door was a console. "I'm going in, keep me covered." John ordered as descended down the grav lift.

As he landed on the floor alarms began going off and the room lit up a deep crimson colour. A Sentinel appeared in the doorway but was instantly destroyed by a single shot from the Phantom. John ran across the console and Kalmiya entered the system. Her avatar appeared above the console, "I'm accessing the systems now." she explained. More Sentinels began to enter the hangar and John and the Phantom had to keep up continuous fire to control the numbers. "I'm done!" yelled Kalmiya over the sound of the battle. John reinserted her chip and ran full pelt across the hangar back into the Phantom.

Kelly instantly drew them back out of the ship and into the relative safety of space. "It's that ship there", she said highlighting a huge ship on the display, it was a tetrahedral shape, with a forward triangular prow, and attached to it at equidistant points were three similarly shaped struts, presumably to allow the ship to land. They headed towards the mammoth ship, "The Covenant beat us to it", called Kalmiya, "We need to get aboard before they can take they fleet into slipspace back to Earth." Kelly accelerated the dropship to max speed and it shot through space just as a huge wormhole opened up before the entire fleet and as one it glided into the void.

9. Chapter 8

****Bringing A Rocket To A Gunfight: October 20th 2552****

****Location: Orbit above Earth, _Spirit of Justice_****

"Captain, that carrier is preparing to jumpâ€¦" called Sarah, shocked at the idea of a ship, let alone one so big, jumping to slipspace so close to a planet was a terrible one. The shock waves would ruin anything on the planet that was too close, including the city of New Mombasa. "Sarah, try and access the enemy ship's systems and stop them jumping, we need to stop them getting away, for one the city would be destroyed and we would lose the Spartans as well."

"Aye Captain, I'll do my best." replied Sarah. Everything was silent for a while as the look on her holographic face became one of absolute concentration until finally the look disappeared, "I'm sorry Captain, there's nothing I can do, their systems have got better since I last tried." she looked dejected, disappointed, knowing that she had been unable to save the hundreds of thousands of people who would die when the supercarrier jumped. "It's okay Sarah, it was just a possibility. We need to help protect the planet for as long as we can, I trust the Spartans, they'll get that supercarrier out of commission or at least get it back here."

There were mutters of confirmation from around the bridge as the crew resettled themselves for battle. "Sarah, charge the MAC and target the destroyer, once the MAC is charged open fire and follow it up with two plasma lances, I want the lances to hit in the estimated location of the reactor." ordered Price as he brought his ship back into the battle. "MAC charging Sir, thirty seconds to fire." Sarah confirmed, the bridge was quiet save for crewmen issuing orders to the Longsword squadrons and the sound of the point defense turrets all over the ship trying to deal with the Seraph fighters.

"Charging complete." called Sarah and the ship shuddered and the bridge lights dimmed as the MAC unleashed a devastating bolt of thunder towards to destroyer. The huge ship tried to swerve out of the way but it was too slow, the heavy round hit it in the stem sending it keeling over. As the destroyer tried to right itself the plasma lances hit and went through the already weakened shield, the ship exploded in a burst of purple and blue flames as the reactor blew, shattering the doomed ship. The _Justice_ was already moving on to her next target when suddenly a plasma torpedo shot up from the carrier below and whacked into the _Justice_, she careened over to one side from the blast, her side trailing plumes of fire into space. "Status report!" yelled Price over the sound of explosions and wailing sirens, "We've been hit midship by a plasma torpedo, the reactor is safe but the coolant pipes are melted on one side, we can't push it past 50%, we've lost Archer pods G through J and the superstructure is weakened around the hit site, we can't afford to take any more hits in that area or the ship may rip in half." Sarah warned as she read off the list of damage, Price winced as if he himself had been hit, the barracks were in the area hit, he just hoped most of the Marines hand't been in there.

"Bring us into a slingshot around the Moon, then accelerate us on an attack vector on the on of the battle cruisers, as we pick up speed use power from the engines to speed up charging the MAC, once the MAC

hits fire off one of the plasma turrets, that should be enough to take it down." ordered Price, eager to get his ship some respite from the hot combat zone above the planet. The ship rumbled as the damaged engines were pushed harder and the superstructure groaned and pinged as the ship pulled away from Earth's gravity. The speed began to pick up noticeably as it pushed itself into a slingshot around the Moon. As they ship swung around the engines began to die down as some of their power was diverted to charge the MAC asap. The _Justice_ was a sight as it hurtled around from behind the ball of rock, streaming fire and reactor coolant, the MAC fired and smashed into one of the battled cruisers, knocking it into another, the plasma lance struck around the reactor and the ship exploded, taking the other battle cruiser with it, the wreckage tumbled down through the atmosphere to crash into the ocean.

The _Justice_, however, continued on her trajectory as she struggled to slow down without crashing into another ship or putting too much strain on the already weakened hull. The massive ship slowed and sat, almost dead in space as the remains of the Covenant fleet were destroyed around her.

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It had been three hours since the last of the Covenant fleet had been destroyed and the remnant of the UNSC fleet was in tatters. Among the least damaged was the _Spirit of Justice_ but all things were relative, she was hardly space worthy. Her superstructure was fractured, reactor coolant half gone, barracks blown apart, weapons damaged and fires still flickered in places.

Captain Price had been docked with the UNSC repair and refit station _Rebirth_ for five hours and she was approaching the limit of what could be done for her in the short time that had been allotted to her, with most of the fleet in ruins larger and more heavily armed ships like the _Justice_ had been prioritized but the other, smaller, ships were still important. The superstructure had been patched to make her space worthy, the coolant pipes and the liquid itself had been replaced and the armor which had been melted away by plasma fire had been replaced. She pulled away from the station at least able to move again and capable of lasting a while in combat. Command formed the fleet up into some semblance of order ready for the Covenant counter attack which would inevitably come. The _Justice_ made up a large chunk of the defence force's firepower. She was the only ship in the fleet with plasma weapons since it had been unknown whether her disappearance had been due to her experimental weapons malfunctioning.

Small construction drones still buzzed throughout the ship performing small, yet potentially important repairs. Things seemed calm for a time as the wreckage from the previous battle was shunted out of the way by smaller ships and the fleet reassembled.

They were in for a long wait.

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"This is Lord Hood to all UNSC ships, we have detected an unknown fleet inbound to Earth, slipspace signatures show the supercarrier that bugged out earlier along with twenty four other unidentified ships. All ships come back up to full combat alert and move to the

coordinates I'm sending you. Prepare yourselves, this is our final stand." he signed off the fleet wide comm, "You heard the man, get us where we need to go." ordered Price.

The engines rumbled as the ship accelerated to a position above the North Pole, looking out over the destruction in orbit. There were dozens of carcasses of destroyers, frigates and even a carrier.

The fleet had moved to the set locations and were forced to wait for the enemy to arrive. "Charger your MAC guns and Captain Price, warm up your plasma turrets." ordered Hood over the comm. The bridge lights dimmed a little as the reactor was called upon to prepare the weapons.

Just as the MAC reached full charge the new threat arrived. Rather than the expected number of slipspace ruptures appearing one huge rupture opened up, the spectacle was stunning as the new alien ships glided out of the vortex. At the centre of the fleet sat the Covenant supercarrier, Glorious Redemption. "Sir, I'm getting a transmission from the supercarrier, patching it through now."

On the main screen appeared the image of an alien creature, it was like nothing they had seen before. It was frail, the arms appeared to be as thin as twigs and the alien's face was grotesque, whilst vaguely human it had strange lumps and bulges in the places one would expect a human to have hair. It wore red robes and had on an ornate head piece, it opened it's mouth to speak. "Human vermin", it began, "You cower in your ships and dare to face the glory of fleet given to us by the Gods. We shall take these mighty vessels, burn your world and activate the portal to the heart of the Great Journey!" the creature roared at them, with a flourish and with that the channel was cut.

The new fleet moved towards the UNSC fleet, every ship seemed to move as one, as if controlled from a single location. Suddenly the biggest ship opened fire, a lance of yellow energy shot forth and split a frigate in two.

"All ships fire at will!" yelled Lord Hood over the fleet wide comm.

****Into The Breach: October 20th 2552****

****Location: Unknown Forerunner vessel****

"We need to get to the bridge, if this fleet is controlled from there then we need to get in control before we get back to Earth or the home fleet is screwed. Lets move out." John ordered as he, Kelly, Fred and Linda began to run through the corridors of the alien vessel.

The trouble was every corridor looked the same, there were branches off left and right but John ignored them all, hoping he would eventually find a console for Kalmiya to get some information from at least. As if he had been heard, a console appeared in the wall as the rounded a corner, "Stop", her ordered, "I'm going to insert Kalmiya into the systems, try and find a map." they all halted as John put Kalmiya into the console. Her figure appeared on the holo display, "This ship is so ancient, you couldn't even imagine, it has the fire power to destroy Earth unaided, but with this fleet it'll be too

easyâ€| Waitâ€| Oh thank God! Those Covenant fools, this is the only ship which has any weapons, the others are all cargo ships but the feet won't know that, they'll flee, not knowing what the threat really is. We need to get to the bridge, I'll direct you as we go, for now, turn around."

Kalmiya directed them along the network of corridors that lead to the bridge, John soon realised that he never had a chance of leading them there but was content to let Kalmiya direct him where to go. They careened around a corner, ahead of them was a door, heavily guarded by three elite Zealots and a hunter pair. "Retreat!" John yelled, recognizing that they had no chance if they charged straight in. They leapt back round the corner, pursued by a fuel rod blast. "Linda, do you still have Edmunds' sniper rifle?" John asked, a plan forming in his mind. "Yes Sir." Linda replied, her voice had an air of surprise that he needed to ask, "Good, Kelly, Fred and I will throw two grenades each down there, then the three of us crouch around the corner and open fire with our assault rifles, Linda, stay behind us and aim for the hunters first if they're still standing."

They nodded and Kelly, Fred and John rounded the corner, grenades in hand, as they threw them they heard a yelp of surprise as six grenades rolled around their feet. The ensuing explosions masked their dying screams, when they went back round the corner two elites were paste and one hunter was bleeding badly. The three roared with rage as they saw the Spartans. The hunters opened fire and one shot hit the ground at their feet, melting the ground and throwing them back into the wall from the force of the blast. The second shot soared into the ceiling and hit one of the support beams. As it cracked the metal panels above fell down and blocked the passage.

"Is everyone okay?" asked John , he couldn't see through the smoke but was relieved when he saw three acknowledgment lights flash green but then one flash red. Kelly. He activate his head torch to try and pierce the smoke, eventually he was able to make out her IFF tag, it seemed to flicker in and out of visibility, clearly one of their suits had been damaged. As he approached her and the smoke settled he was sure he knew whose it was. Splayed out in the corner, fires around her, was Kelly. Her armor was wrecked, the chest piece had born the brunt of the fuel rod blast and had melted to her skin. She groaned and tried to sit up but couldn't move from the agonizing pain. John knelt down beside her and began injecting her with biofoam and a strong pain killer, this was not the place he wanted to have a wounded soldier.

As the biofoam and pain killers took effect she forced herself to sit up and got up, shakily, to her feet. She picked up her assault rifle from the rubble and, although she was limping badly, flashed her acknowledgment light green. John was forced to accept her choice and he began to examine the blockage between them and the bridge.

"Kalmiya, are there any other routes to the bridge?" John asked, hoping that any other routes would be easy. "Sorry, that was the only entrance, the ship is designed to bottleneck invaders, including us." Kalmiya explained. John sighed and turned to the rubble. He reached out and pulled at the biggest chunk of metal, he pulled but the lump only moved a little. Fred followed him over and together they yanked the chunk, it began to move until suddenly it keeled over and with a crash fell flat on the floor. As the group stared through the dust they had created they made out the bulk of a hunter charging towards

them. "Move!" John bellowed over the comm and they leapt out of the way of the charging behemoth. It smashed through the remains of the wreckage with a roar and swung it's shield. Fred narrowly dodged it as it swung over his head and cracked into the wall. The shield had hit the wall hard and was sunk in so deep the alien warrior was unable to pull it free. The alien roared as it struggled to pull free. John took advantage and slipped under the trapped arm, he swung up over the hunter's back, drew his combat knife, and slit horizontally across the mass of worms visible between the armored plates. The creature seemed to scream as it felt and the severed worms fell out of the armor, coating the floor and John's armor in bright orange blood.

The entrance to the bridge was clear and the group progressed cautiously towards the door. The remained motionless as they approached and as Linda knelt down to try and open it via the console the whole ship shuddered as it slowed down out of slipspace.

"We're too late." John said simply.

****The Gateway: October 20th 2552****

****Location: Orbit Above Earth, _Spirit of Justice_****

"Target that central ship and fire everything." ordered Price, his voice desperate after witnessing the firepower of the huge ship he wanted it gone. The lights on the bridge dimmed so low they almost shut off as huge amounts of power were drawn upon to fire every plasma turret, both MAC guns and every Archer pod at the enemy ship. Every shot hit it, the ensuing explosions were huge, revealing the firepower the _Justice_ could bring to bear. Out of the explosion the ship soared as if nothing had happened. "What..?" breathed Price, stunned that anything could survive that much firepower.

The smaller ships in the enemy fleet had yet to open fire but they slammed at full speed into the human ships, gutting them into wrecks. The huge central ship opened fire, this time on the planet below, the city of New Mombasa, already in ruins from the supercarrier's jump, was obliterated.

Without warning hundreds of slipspace ruptures opened up around the planet, followed by one void opening up. The ruptures spewed out a massive fleet of over a hundred ships and the same space station the _Justice_ had encountered at Halo. High Charity.

The comm channel came alive as Lord Hood issued orders to the entire fleet, "All ships, pull back, we don't stand a chance against that fleet, rendezvous above Mars." he signed off the channel and with a sigh Price issued the orders and the _Justice_ fled from the battle.

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"We need to get out of here." John decided, they had arrived at Earth and Kalmiya had reported that the fleet was being hammered despite the lack of weaponry on most of the ships. The group half ran back to the hangar, Kelly trailing a little despite the lessened pace.

As they entered the hangar John breathed a sigh of relief, the modified Phantom was exactly where they had left it. The group

floated up in the grav lift and into the troop bay. John leapt into the pilot's seat and activated the Phantom, he pulled back out of the hangar and into open space. The huge Forerunner ship sped past them as they dodged around it and headed out, away from the ancient fleet. Far ahead of them they could see the back end of the UNSC fleet heading for Mars, he pushed the accelerator to max and they shot forward in pursuit of the friendly forces.

As the Phantom pulled in closer to the fleet a single Longsword moved towards them, realising their intent John quickly opened a comm channel, "This is Spartan 117, I have the rest of my team onboard, I have injured and require immediate docking with the UNSC _Spirit of Justice_." The Longsword pilot swung around back to the fleet, relaying the message, in amongst the mass of ships the huge size of the _Justice_ was easy to spot and they drew the Phantom into the hangar. "Welcome back Spartans, I've sent a med team to the hangar, it's good to have you back." Price signed off the radio as they pulled into the hangar and lowered themselves to a landing height.

As they rode down the grav lift they were greeted by the medics who rushed Kelly away while John, Fred and Linda reported to the bridge to explain what had happened to them.

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Once on the bridge the three Spartans snapped to attention before the Captain who returned the gesture, "What exactly happened to you the supercarrier jumped?" asked Price. "Sir", John began, "After we boarded the supercarrier, as you know, it jumped away. After a brief journey it dropped out of slipspace in the middle of nowhere, we were on the bridge and saw that the Covenant had found the remains of a Forerunner fleet, while onboard we found a locked down AI named Kalmiya who is currently with the techs, being analyzed. After that it was a race to get to the command ship first and take control of the fleet and I am ashamed to say the Covenant beat us, we soon discovered that most of the Forerunner fleet didn't have weapons thanks to Kalmiya. They jumped into slipspace and by the time we had fought our way to the bridge the fleet had dropped out back here, I decided we should meet up with any friendly forces to get medical support. We stole a Phantom andâ€| here we are." he explained.

Price let out a low whistle, the tale they told was incredible and some of their intel could be vital for the defense of Earth. "I'm sending you over to Cairo Station, they dragged it here with us and that's where Lord Hood is, we need to get this intel to him." ordered Price. Together he and the Spartans exited the bridge and took a Pelican over to the Cairo.â€|

"It's good to see you alive." sighed Hood as the Spartans walked into the command centre of the Cairo. Once they had parted with their story and all the intel they had Hood gave them their orders, "You've joined us in our darkest hour, that Covenant fleet is currently digging around the ruins of New Mombasa, we've picked up a few of their transmissions and they seem to be searching for a site which, they believe, is vital to their religion. I'm sending you three to the surface to investigate. Good luck."

The group saluted and turned to leave the command centre, just before they left John turned and asked, "Sir? What do we do when we find out

what the Covenant are looking for?"

Hood was silent for a moment before he replied, "When you find out what they're doing report in and I'll update your orders." Satisfied John turned and left. The journey back to the _Justice_ was silent and tense, no one dared speak. They all knew that this was one of the most dangerous missions the Spartans had been on and there was every likelihood it could be their last.

As the Pelican landed Price climbed down off the ramp followed by the three Spartans. They walked across the bay, grabbed their weapons and Fred relieved the pilot of the controls and once they were all onboard the back hatch was sealed and they began the long flight back to Earth.

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The tiny craft passed, unnoticed and ignored, through the Covenant armada and began the descent through the atmosphere. As the dropped below the clouds what the Covenant were doing became clear. Where New Mombasa had once stood there was nothing but a crater, Covenant battle cruisers and carriers soared over the area, excavation beams digging through the rock, slowly revealing a huge structure, clearly Forerunner. Fred brought the Pelican in to land on the rim of the crater.

The group exited and made their way to the edge of the crater, the drop was huge, revealing how much digging the Covenant had done. The ground rumbled as a Covenant carrier roared overhead, activating it's excavation beam and burning through yet more rock.

The group continued to move around the edge of the crater, trying to find some sort of clue as to what the construct was for. Suddenly, there was a clap of thunder and a roar of mighty engines and the huge command ship of the Forerunner fleet descended from above, it slowly lowered down onto the plinth that had been excavated and the engines cut out and there was silence. "We need to find out what this thing is before the Covenant can use it." commented Linda and with a nod they moved on.

Eventually they came to an area which had been dug out by hand, there were steps leading down into the edge of the site, they seemed to descend far down to the bottom of the excavation site. As they began their descent down towards the dig site the bottom was shrouded in a strange mist. It became impossible to see as they walked down through the dense until suddenly an alien form lurched out of the fog, wielding an energy sword. The startled elite roared at the sight of the three Spartans, it leapt at them, bringing down the sword in an indicated pattern, Linda was forced to duck in order to save her head, she swung her leg around knocking the alien's legs out from under it. It fell to the ground but quickly leapt to its feet and charged again, John opened fire with his rifle, laying down suppressive fire on the creature to try and give Linda enough time to get out of the way.

Once she had scrambled away John drew a captured plasma grenade and threw it at the alien's face. It stuck and the magnesium white burning warned of the imminent death, there was a mighty explosion and the remains of the elite fell to the ground, minus a head, and flooded the ground with thick purple blood. They moved on past the

dead alien and continued down into the fog, rifles at the ready in case they got any more nasty surprises. Without warning they dropped below the fog layer and the scale of the dig became evident, the thing was huge, easily one hundred kilometers across, the ground was covered in unidentifiable alien runes and not far from them was an entrance into the side of the dig site.

They marched over two it and the door opened in response to their presence, inside the hallway beyond was the remains of a battle. Bits of battered Sentinel lay across the ground surrounded by half burnt bodies of elites, grunts, jackals and even a few brutes. They progressed warily into the structure, not knowing which side had won the battle or which side they wanted to have won the battle.

After a short while the corridor branched left and right, not knowing for sure which way to go he chose the route which had the most blood on the floor. Their boots stuck to the ground in the thick, coagulated until up ahead they came to a door, wedged open by a dead brute. The door gave in trying to shut as they approached and slid open, allowing them access to a room full of alien holo panels, and controls. Standing among the controls were five elite honour guards.

As one of them flicked a switch the ground began to vibrate and the aliens let out a roar of triumph. They turned to leave the room and for the first time spotted the Spartans watching them from the doorway. "Kill the Demons!" roared the biggest of the three elite, it drew an energy sword and followed by it's fellows charged the Spartans. Fred drew his shotgun, blasting away part of the elite's face, it fell to the ground choking on the blood which filled it's mouth. The crack of Linda's sniper cut through the air and one of the aliens' heads exploded in a spray of blood and bone. John threw his last plasma grenade at the head of the nearest elite, the alien desperately tried to rip it off but stumbled into it's comrades and the whole group disappeared in a blaze of burning hot plasma as the grenade set off the ones the guards had had.

"We need to get outside", ordered John, "find out what they just did." They ran back through the blood drenched corridors and out onto the dig site. In the time they had been inside the battle cruisers and carriers had finished their digging and the Forerunner ship sat in the middle of area. All around them huge petal like structures were rising up into the sky, once they had risen to just short of vertical the mechanism ground to a halt. The fourteen petals launched strange blue glowing beams up far into the sky. From the ship in the centre a lance of white energy launched up into the sky, burning away the clouds and revealing the open sky. Where the beam met a small swirling vortex was formed, as the lance of energy struck it opened to huge proportions blotting out the sky. The ancient ship rose up and headed for the slipspace portal. "I'm contacting the Captain." John informed.

10. Chapter 9

****On The Other Side: October 20th 2552****

****Location: Orbit Above Earth, _Spirit of Justice_****

The UNSC fleet had been sat in orbit above Mars, having to watch as

the huge Covenant fleet swarmed over the Earth, focusing on the African continent, around the location of the ruins of New Mombasa. The ships had been there for an hour when something happened among the ancient Forerunner ships.

One ship particular turned and headed for the massive space station, realising something was going wrong the Covenant fleet had opened fire on the ship but, as the Spirit of Justice had seen, the weapons had no effect. The ship accelerated towards the station and slammed into the hull in a huge column of fire and debris. The station listed to one side from the heavy impact. Using the long range sensors Price got a better look at the impact, pouring into the station were dozens of Flood. "Sarah, I need the Admiral on priority one channel, Earth is in grave danger. That space station which just got hit by the Forerunner ship, I know what happened. The Flood were onboard that ship and took it over from inside, they sent it on a collision course with the station and now they're invading. If the Flood gets to Earth we can kiss goodbye to the planet."

After just a few seconds the face of Lord Hood appeared on the main display, "What is it Captain Price, this isn't a good time to give me more bad news." Hood looked tired and ready to break if he heard more bad news but but he needed to know, reasoned Price. "Sir, the ship which just crashed into the enemy space station contained the same parasitic life form which we fought so hard to destroy on the first Halo ring. If the parasite gets to Earth we can say goodbye to the entire planet." explained Price, Hood looked horrified but his look turned to thought, "Thank you Captain, I willâ€¦" suddenly sirens went off all over the Justice and could be heard on the Cairo over the comm. Hood cut the channel and Price turned to the Ensign on comms. "Ensign, what's happening?" after a brief pause the Ensign turned, "Sir, something's happening on the planet. The clouds above the dig site are clearing due to an energy pulse andâ€¦ oh my Godâ€¦ Sir there's some kind of portal opening up in the atmosphere." the young man had gone pale, Price himself felt shocked, "Sarah, recall all ground teams I want the Spartans onboard asap." he ordered.

"Yes Sir, I'm getting orders from the Cairo, we're to wait until most of the Covenant fleet have gone through the portal and then follow them, from there he'll asses the situation further." explained Sarah. It was thirty minutes before the Spartans got off the planet in their Pelican, gave the space station a wide berth and got back to the Justice.

"Sir, I'm getting a fleet wide communication from the Covenant carrier Shadow of Intent, Lord Hood wants us all to hear it so I'm patching it through."

The face of a huge elite appeared on the view screen, it had lost one mandible and another was badly damaged, "Humans, I am Rtas 'Vadumee, shipmaster of the Shadow of Intent, while my teams were on the surface they encountered a Forerunner made artificial intelligence of incredible knowledge. It told us that the war we have waged against your kind for all these years was not just, we were manipulated by the Prophets and have been made fools of. As a race we have repented of to sins and in order to defeat the parasite which now spreads through our Holy City, we suggest an Alliance between our two races."

There was silence on every bridge, every command centre of every ship

and MAC platform in the human fleet. The enemy they had been losing to for twenty years, on the brink of victory, at thrown it all away in the name of honesty? The channel stayed open as Lord Hood's voice came over the comm, "I am Lord Hood, leader of humanities' forces, I have considered your offer and would like to acceptâ€| on one condition." Hood explained the elite's face contorted angrily but then calmed, "What?" growled the elite, his voice betraying the anger he had hidden, "That your people accept responsibility for the war, help us rebuild and agree to share your technology with us." Hood demanded.

The elite seemed to grind its' mandibles for a moment before it spoke, "Alright human, we shall be allies. When the war is over and we have won we shall sit down and discuss this further." The screen went blank as the comm was cut and the ex-Covenant ships moved away from the planet towards the human fleet over Mars. "Keep an eye on them", ordered Hood over the comm, "I don't trust them yet. First sign of trouble shoot first and ask questions later."

As he signed off the comm Price turned to Sarah "Do you think this is real, can we trust them?" Sarah was silent for a moment, deep in thought, when she spoke she did so slowly, carefully choosing her words, "I think we can", she explained, "I analysed the transmission and he displayed every sign of being truthful, it is possible that he faked the signs but I think we can trust him. I'll monitor the comm channels from the carrier to make sure we don't miss anything." Her hologram disappeared as she focused her attention on monitoring enemy frequencies.

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There was silence in the command centre aboard the Cairo station as the fleetmaster was lead in by three Marine guards, he had with him two other elites in the white armor of Ultras. As he approached he nodded to Hood and began to speak, "There is much we must discuss but that can wait, right now we must peruse the Prophets through the Portal. On the other side lies the Ark, I believe you are familiar with the Halo array and what it is capable of. On the Ark lies a place from which all seven rings can be activated at once. If this is allowed to happen then we shall all die."

Hood remained silent for a moment, considering the information, "Fleetmaster, while I agree it is of the utmost importance that the rings do not fire you must also see that Earth must be defended, if it falls then humanity shall be wiped from existence. I can only send a few ships with you but they shall be some of our best. I will send the UNSC _Forward Unto Dawn, Say My Name _and the _Spirit of Justice_. All three of these ships are commanded by some of the best officers in the UNSC and the _Justice_ has a squad of four Spartan-IIs. They are the only ships I can afford to spare in case any more Covenant ships arrive."

"Thank you, I understand your situation and the ships you have provided will be ideal. We shall depart soon, may the strength of the gods guide your way Admiral." Rtas bowed as he turned and left the command centre to return to the _Shadow of Intent_. As he returned to the dropship he was pulled up the gravity life and into the craft, "Are there any signs that the humans seek to betray us?" asked Rtas of the elite spec ops warrior he had dispatched to access the human systems and make sure their deal was true. "No fleetmaster, the

humans seem to have much honour and, while the still harbor some doubts, the do for the time being trust us." A smile came to Rtas' mandibles as the Phantom lifted off and left the hangar to return to the _Shadow of Intent_ from where he would command the destruction of the treacherous Covenant and restore honour to his people.

Once he had returned to his flagship he exited the Phantom and walked at a brisk pace to the bridge, crew members scattered as they saw the fleetmaster coming along the corridor, ignoring anyone that got in his way, knocking them to the ground. As the bridge door opened at his presence the crew stood up and his second in command reported all systems were as they should be and they could accelerate through the Portal at his command. He sat down in his command chair and pointed forwards, "Take us in, our fight is on the other side with the bastard Truth and the other Prophets." At his command the ship glided forwards, flanked by his fleet and the three human ships. Together the accelerated into the Portal and were instantly whisked away.

****Another Fight?: October 21th 2552****

****Location: In Slipspace, _Spirit of Justice_****

"Sarah, do we have any idea how long the jump is going to take?" asked Price, desperate to give his crew some rest but it wasn't possible because they could come out of slipspace and need to fight at any time. "I'm sorry Sir but even my best estimates are just guesses andâ€¦ waitâ€¦ there's your answer, I don't know how but the _Shadow of Intent_ just sent us a message, the jump will take three days and in the meantime we should rest, complete any and all possible repairs." Price sighed with relief, at least now he could take his crew off high alert and get some rest, "Lieutenant Shaw, you have the bridge while I'm gone, alert me of anything important." Shaw saluted him as Price left the bridge for his quarters. Once he was in his room he loosened his collar and picked up the bottle of whiskey from under his desk and poured himself a shot. He downed it in one. It had been a stressful few days and he needed a break, he leant back onto his bed and promptly fell asleep.

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He awoke five hours later, it made a nice change for him to wake up naturally but then he realized he hadn't, his alarm was going off and had woken him. He silently cursed himself for not deactivating it but decided he need to get up and check on the crew. After a hot shower and shave he returned to the bridge. To his surprise everything was as he had left it, the main screen still showed the inky blackness of slipspace.

He sat down in the command chair and Sarah's avatar popped up next to him, "Sleep well Captain?" she asked, her voice sounded as refreshed as he felt.

"Yes thank you, what's our status, any contact from the elites?" he asked, still not totally trusting their new allies. "Yes Sir, it appears that their original calculations were highly inaccurate, rather than taking three days the journey will only take us another half an hour. The fleetmaster blamed it on an underestimation of how fast the slipstream the Portal made was." she explained. Price sighed sadly, so much for his long break but at least the war was drawing to

a conclusion, one way or another. "Okay, get the crew up and battle ready so we're prepared for when we exited." The ship bustled as everyone got to their station and steeled themselves for the battle ahead, it was undoubtedly the most vital one of the war.

The ship shuddered as it dropped out of slipspace above the construct below. It was massive, bigger in diameter than Halo and Earth combined. It had eight "arms" four wider ones and four slightly thinner ones coming off of a central ring, In the centre of this inner ring was a moon. "The Ark" Price whispered, stunned at the size of the construction. Then he saw the reason they were there. In orbit above the Ark was the huge Covenant fleet, less in number now the elites had quit the Covenant but still massive. Price noticed that the ships already bore damage and then he saw that not all the ships were under Covenant control, some had turned a strange brown colour, evidence that they were tainted by the Flood, there seemed to be a war being fought between the Flood and the remains of the Covenant and both sides were ignoring the new elite and human ships.

The surface of the Ark also bore evidence of the growing conflict, huge areas of the Ark were stained the same brown colour as the tainted ships. The Ark was infected. The comm bleeped and a transmission came in from the Flood ship, "_Do not shoot, but listen! The Covenant seeks to activate the rings ,those who built this place knew what they wrought. Do not mistake their intent, or all will perish as they did before. We must stop what they have set in motion, there is still time to stop the key from turning. Together we shall defeat our enemy. I shall keep them busy while you find and eliminate their leaders who are currently on the construct, seeking to activate it_" the voice was deep and rasping, suddenly Price recognised it. The voice from the Spartans' audio logs on the first Halo, the Flood central intelligence had escaped and returned. 'Vadumee opened a private comm channel to Price, who had been put in charge of all human forces in the fleet, "Price, what the Parasite says is true, I fear we must make an alliance with the Parasite if we are to save all." Price sighed, he had no wish to work with anything which was capable of turning men into monsters but he was also a realist and saw that if they didn't work with the Flood, they didn't stand a chance. Once 'Vadumee had confirmed the alliance the Flood ships increased their rate of fire, keeping the Covenant fleet busy while the Human-Sangheili fleet snuck past into orbit above the Ark.

'Vadumee's voice came in over the comm, he sounded haggard, "Captain, on every Forerunner construct there is a facility they call the Silent Cartographer, we must find it in order to locate the control room before the Covenant. There are two probable locations but I can't be sure which it is, I shall send a squad to investigate one and you shall send down the Spartans to search the other, 'Vadumee out." As the elite signed off the comm Price turned to Sarah, "You heard him, get those Spartans down there." he ordered.

****This War Will End: October 21th 2552****

****Location: Surface of The Ark****

As the Pelican descended through the atmosphere John, Kelly, Fred and Linda carried out their equipment checks, Fred, Kelly and John cleaned their rifles while Linda performed complicated zeroing and

configuring on her sniper rifle but by the time they arrived at their destination they were all ready to move out. As the Pelican came lower they leapt out and landed on the ground with a thud. On three sides of them was beautiful landscape so typical of Forerunner constructs, coniferous forests, vast oceans and high cliffs but the direction they had to go was less pleasant. The land was covered in a layer of Flood biomass, the trees were dead and turning a deathly brown. It was in this direction that they had to travel to reach the possible location of the Silent Cartographer. As they stepped out onto the Flood infested land John was reminded strongly of the first Halo where they had encountered the Flood and thought they had destroyed it. In the distance a large yet squat looking structure could be seen built out over a bluff. "That must be the Cartographer." John called back, "Let's double time it, I want us there asap." Together they moved off eyeing the terrain for any signs of betrayal from their newest ally.

As they marched across the fleshy land the air was thick with spores and all around them wandered Flood tank forms, combat forms, infection forms and carrier form, even some forms he had never seen before. It was a veritable army and he couldn't help but realise that if the Flood chose to betray them at that moment they wouldn't stand a chance. Slowly the structure got closer the figures of unknown creatures appeared around the structure, as they got closer it became clear that it was a team of Covenant loyalists, three brutes and five grunts to be exact. "Linda", John called, as she continued as she approached, "What's the range you're getting on those brutes?"

"Around one kilometer" she replied, "Do you want me to take them down?" she asked, looking to him for an answer, "When I give the signal take them out.", he ordered, "Kelly you're with me Fred, you'll be spotter." The team split up and went their separate ways, John and Kelly snuck up on the brutes from the side while Fred and Linda headed for the high ground. Once they were in position Linda flashed her acknowledgment light, John and Kelly drew grenades and lobbed them at the edge of the enemy group, herding them closer. John flashed his light and there were several cracks from Linda's direction and the brutes fell to the ground, minus their heads. John and Kelly leapt in and hosed the grunts with rifle fire, they collapsed to the ground in a slowly growing puddle of blood.

It was a few minutes before Fred and Linda had trekked to the building to meet up with John and Kelly, this gave John and Kelly the chance to sit down and count up their ammo and work out a plan to search what could be the Silent Cartographer. Once Linda and Fred had arrived the group moved into the structure and methodically searched every room, slowly making their way down the structure out from the bluff over the sea. Eventually they came to a platform that stuck out, slightly below sea level but rather than being underwater as it should have been the sea appeared to be up against an invisible wall. In the centre of the balcony around the abyss was a terminal. Slowly, cautiously John approached the terminal and activated it. In front of him, hovering in the air was a huge holographic projection of the Ark, instinctively he reported to Price over the comm, "Sir, we've found the Cartographer, I'm uploading the details to the _Justice over the wireless system. What are our new orders?"

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"Well done Chief, return to the surface, we'll send a Pelican to collect you. Once we've analysed the map you'll be sent with an elite strike team to get to the control room and neutralise the Covenant Prophets before they activate the ring." After signing off the comm he turned to Sarah, "Can you put the map up on the central holopad." Instantly the map appeared above the device and Price and Sarah gathered around it to work out a plan. "Sir", Sarah explained, "I've located the control room and it seems to be unprotected. I'll transmit the coordinates to the _Shadow of Intent_ and the Spartans' Pelican. The two teams will rendezvous near the building and have to fight their way to it."

"Excellent" muttered Price, then spoke more loudly, "What's the situation in the orbital battle?" The map of the Ark disappeared and was replaced with a three dimensional view of the battle in orbit. Much of the Covenant fleet was cast in red, indicating severe damage, however, the Flood fleet was almost totally destroyed. Both good and bad news. If the Flood fleet was destroyed then it wouldn't make it possible for the Flood to get away from the Ark, but it would leave the Covenant an opening to attack to Human-Sangheili fleet. Price pressed a button to open a channel with 'Vadumee, "Fleetmaster, the Flood have almost lost despite dealing the Covenant fleet heavy damage. I suggest we leave it as long as we can before moving in then do so in grand scale. The entire fleet should engage the enemy and obliterate them." Price explained, hoping the fleetmaster would be willing to agree. "A sound plan human, we shall overwhelm our enemies, however, I would advise that one ship remains out of the battle to provide support for our ground teams." 'Vadumee decided. Seeing it was a reasonable suggestion Price agreed, "Good idea, perhaps we should leave the _Forward Unto Dawn_ out of the battle, it is the smallest ship in the fleet and whilst she isn't weak, she won't last long in a heavyweight fight like this." The fleetmaster nodded and cut the comm channel.

After issuing the orders to the _Dawn_ and getting the other human ships lined up with the elite fleet Price was left with little to do except order his crew to maintain missile locks for the MAC, Archers and plasma turrets until the time to fire came. There was tense silence on the bridge as the last Flood controlled ship slugged it out with the five ships left in the Covenant fleet. Finally, in a surge of purple flame and bits of biomass the ship exploded, signaling the moment for the allied fleet to move in. As the fleet of twenty elite ships and two human ships arrayed itself against tiny Covenant loyalist fleet. The message came from 'Vadumee to open fire and no ship hesitated, the _Spirit_ alone launched off two MAC rounds and ten plasma lances along with countless Archers. As the blanket of plasma neared the Covenant ships they tried to dodge but the almost wall like array of plasma struck the ships burning instantly through the shields and melting into the ships, by the time the MACs and Archers hit they were simply obliterating terminally damaged ships.

Suddenly the Portal opened up behind them and the mammoth form of _High Charity_ appeared in the heavens. It streaked across space straight through the middle of the allied fleet, the ships were forced to scatter as the Covenant Holy City sped past on a heading for the Ark. Suddenly a transmission came in from the doomed station, "_Silence fills the empty grave now that I have come, join your voice with mine and we shall sing victory, everlasting._" _The comm channel cut out with a burst of static as _High Charity_ ploughed into the

surface of the Ark at high speed, leaving a deep gash in the construct. "Sarah, contact 'Vadumee, we need to reassemble the fleet."

****One More Betrayal: October 21th 2552****

****Location: Surface of The Ark****

"Chief, get onboard I've been ordered to take you and your team to the control room. Captain wants you to stop the Prophets before they activated the rings." explained the pilot as the Spartans clambered up into the Pelican and it sped off over the Flood tainted ocean of the Ark towards the control room. "Get some rest, we all need it." John ordered and the Spartans sat down to take a break. Within moments they had all fallen asleep to the thrumming of the dropship's engines.

It was getting dark when they finally awoke to the pilot's warning that they had arrived. They climbed out of their positions in the troop bay and looked out. The artificial sun was setting over the horizon of the Ark, behind the huge citadel like control room. Hovering above the Citadel were two Phantoms, one was transmitting elite signals, the other was brute controlled. The two were slugging it out, firing plasma blasts at each other, it seemed to be an even match until the Pelican arrived on the scene and launched a flurry of Anvil-II missiles at the enemy Phantom until it exploded in a plume of purple flame which cast mad shadows as the wreckage fell to the ground.

"Thank you humans, this is the strike team sent to assist you by fleetmaster Rtas 'Vadumee. We shall work together to infiltrate the Citadel and silence the treacherous Prophets." the voice of an elite said over the comm. Both Pelican and Phantom hovered alongside each other as they dispensed their forces onto the plateau before the Citadel. Once they had all disembarked the Spartans and elites looked at each other. "Demo-â€¦ Spartans, it is an honour to fight alongside you. We have always revered your kind as noble warriors." the elite explained, John suddenly had a wave of memories, he recognised the elite or at least the armor he wore. "The Arbiter", John breathed, "but I killed you, I saw you die on the first Halo." he took a step back, shocked that the alien could have cheated death. "Not quite Spartan", the elite chuckled, "you did kill an Arbiter at Halo but during a time of crisis the Covenant selects an Arbiter, you killed my predecessor, Ripa 'Moramee, he was a mighty warrior, it is impressive that you defeated him. When he died the post of Arbiter was left unfilled but after your ship destroyed Halo under the nose of my fleet I was humiliated. I was branded with the mark of shame" he gestured to his chest, "I was sentenced to death but the Prophet of Truth decided the best way to kill me was to make me Arbiter and give me suicidal tasks to undertake." the elite seemed disheartened as he told his story, "However, now is not the time for this, we must storm the Citadel and kill the bastard Prophets."

Together the group turned and headed Citadel. As they approached they came to a huge gorge with no evident bridge, knowing what he needed to do, John walked over to the console beside the crevasse and, with little idea what he was doing, pressed a button, across the canyon appeared a glowing light bridge. They marched towards the entrance which slid open as they approached. Lining the walls of the hall leading to an elevator were holographic monitors, as they passed they

came to life with the face of the Prophet of Truth as he began a grand speech, "Though our enemies crowd around us, we tread the blessed path. In a moment I shall light the Holy Rings and divine light shall sweep across the stars delivering all those who are worthy to Godhood and shall destroy the Heretics and their Demon allies." as ever the speech was accompanied by various hand gestures and done in a tone of voice which would only encourage Covenant followers. "Hurry Spartans, we must stop the Prophets!" called the Arbiter as the group broke into a run along the hallway to the lift up. They all leapt on and the lift shot up, propelling them upwards at high speed. As they exited the lift the grand hall in front of them was revealed. It was easily three hundred meters long and the roof towered high above them. Either side of the narrow walkway was a seemingly bottomless fall into the heart of the Ark. Just as the group was about to continue their battle to the controls for the Halo array at the far end of the massive room Flood forms dropped down from above them and the voice of the Gravemind spoke through one of the tank forms, "_Come allies, I shall lead you safely to our foe._" The wave of Flood moved off and began their assault on the Covenant emplacements along the walkway. Finally, after ten minutes of almost continuous gunfire and the roars of the Flood the squad reached the controls for the light bridge. On the far side, silhouetted against the falling sun was Truth, Regret and Mercy. "Excellent", chuckled Truth, "the humans have arrived, come, one of you will activate the Sacred Rings and start the Great Journey." The Prophet looked confident despite the hoards of Flood, Spartans and Elites that surrounded him, "You shall pay for your deception!" roared the Arbiter as he charged forward and lifted Truth up by the throat, "You shall pay for every lie, every deceit, every manipulation! The Great Journey is a lie." whispered the Arbiter, his tone quiet and deadly. With a swift movement he drew his energy sword and drove it into the Prophet's abdomen. The pitiful alien curled up around the wound and let out a moan, "You shall see Arbiter, I may be dead but the Covenant lives on. I shall become a God!" Truth growled as a Flood infection form leapt onto him as the Arbiter dropped him. "_You shall be food, nothing more._" the sinister voice of the Gravemind spoke through Truth. The Arbiter turned to Regret and Mercy, "You, too, shall pay for your crimes but not as he did. Sangheili, bind the traitors." he turned and stalked off as two Ultras stepped forward and bound the Prophets in energy manacles. The group turned to leave the Citadel when they spotted the line of Flood tank forms blocking the bridge, around the platform where they were stood three huge Flood tentacles appeared and the voice of the Gravemind came up from below and through the "mouths" of the various Flood forms around them, "_Now the gate has been unlatched, headstones pushed aside; corpses shift and offer room, a fate you must abide!_" roared the crazed monster. The Spartans and elites congregated in the centre of the platform, taking up defensive positions against the Flood intelligence.

The tentacles crashed down onto the platform snapping it from the walkway. The group clung onto the platform as it fell down into the depths.

11. Chapter 10

****Lost In The Wilderness: October 22nd 2552****

****Location: Low Orbit Above The Ark, _Spirit of Justice_****

"This is 'Vadumee, I just received an emergency message from the ground team, the Flood has betrayed us, we'll get the fleet reorganized then begin glassing the Flood infested areas. I'm entrusting you with destroying the wreckage of _High Charity_, your plasma lances will be better for punching through the hull and hitting the reactor. I'll send you a scan we did of the wreckage to help you hit the right spot." the fleetmaster signed off the comm and Price turned to Sarah. "You heard him, get the _Forward Unto Dawn_ and _Say My Name_ to charge their MAC guns and open fire on the location we send them. We'll use their MACs to punch through the hull and we'll follow up with two plasma lances to crack the reactor." Price explained. Sarah nodded and sent the orders to the other ships and they accelerated ahead of the _Justice_.

It was a stunning sight as the MAC round from the _Dawn_ hit and smashed into the wreckage, followed by two from the _Say My Name_. There was an intense light from within the wreckage indicating that the reactor was overheating. The _Justice_ soared over the wreckage and unleashed two plasma lances which shot forth and into the heart of the reactor. The following explosion was massive, the view screens on the bridge were forced to tint so the crew wouldn't go blind. The massive explosion blew bits of the destroyed city into orbit and as the area cooled all the true destructive force from the blast was revealed. Where _High Charity_ had once rested was a huge hole, through which space could be seen. The blast had blown all the way through the Ark and out the other side.

The two ships soared past the damaged area to rejoin with the elite fleet, Price opened up a comm channel with 'Vadumee, "Fleetmaster, _High Charity_ has been destroyed and the blast blew right through the Ark. I suggest we now focus on stopping the Flood escaping the Ark."

"Well done Captain, we shall continue the glassing while you and your ships watch for Flood activity." Rtas signed off the comm and the bridge in the _Justice_ was silent as the crew waited for the next development.

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When John finally awoke he wished he hadn't, his entire body hurt and as he dragged himself to his feet he looked around and the events leading up to the current situation came back to him. They had just stopped the Prophets activating the rings when the Gravemind had made an appearance, betrayed them and sent the tumbling into the bottomless abyss below the control room.

Evidently bottomless wasn't as infinite as it used to be. He looked around to see bodies scattered around him, some slowly coming too, others still motionless. He accessed the team bio and was relieved to see all his Spartans were still okay, just bruised and out cold. There was a groan as the Arbiter dragged himself to his feet and looked around. "Spartan", he whispered, "What can we do, we are lost and probably assumed dead. Do your fellows still live?" the Arbiter sounded half dead, likely more wounded than he was, after rechecking the team bio he replied, "Yes, they're all okay, just unconscious. What about your elites?" A sad look crossed the Arbiter's face as he looked around at his fellow elites. "All are dead", he said sadly, "except one who is so badly injured he had fallen into a coma and

will be dead in minutes, your armor is indeed superior to ours as are your bodies. But tell me, what can we do now?" John looked around, suddenly curious about where their light was coming from. He looked up and far above them was the artificial sun of the Ark, he looked to the walls, a plan formulating in his mind. Without replying to the Arbiter's question he marched over the wall and examined it, "Spartan, what are you doing?" asked the Arbiter. It was a moment before John replied, "Calling us a ride out of here." he replied. He slapped his hand to the metal wall and channeled his comm channel up into the metal, using it as a relay to the surface, "This is Spartan 117, we were ambushed by the Gravemind after we stopped the Prophets", he looked over to the mangled corpses of the Covenant leaders, "We are currently at the bottom of the trench next to the source of this signal, requesting immediate pick up." he fell silent and waited for a reply, fortunately he wasn't disappointed as the Sarah's voice came in over the comm, "Roger that Chief, good to hear from you, I'll send a dropship down." John pulled away from the Arbiter who was smiling, "Thank you Spartan, we are both warriors but I have not coped well with our current situation, I'm sorry." The Arbiter turned away and John put a hand on his shoulder, "Don't worry, we'll get out of here and find a way to stop the Flood."

By the time the Pelican descended into the trench the other Spartans had woken up and everyone was itching to get going. The group leapt up into the dropship dragging the bodies of the fallen elites with them so that they would be remembered. They also grabbed the dead Prophets as well, one less dead thing for the Flood to infect. The dropship slowly lifted up and roared up out of the trench and up into the smoke filled sky. Looking out across the Ark, huge swathes of the once beautiful landscape were ruined and bore the glow of a glassing just finished. As the Pelican swung around towards the Spirit of Justice a familiar shape rose up from the area around the moon at the centre of the Ark. Another Halo.

"Turn the Pelican around!" yelled John, "I'll speak to Captain Price but I have a plan."

****The Final Solution: October 22nd 2552****

****Location: Near Incomplete Halo Ring, Above The Ark****

Despite the obvious risks it had taken little persuasion to get Price and Rtas to agree to the crazy plan. The Spartans and the Arbiter would land on the Halo, near the control room. Then, they would activate the ring, destroy the Flood and then leave the Ark to return through the Portal to Earth. As the Pelican descended through the ring's atmosphere he looked out on the snowy land below him and wondered whether he would live to see the same view in reverse. He was jolted from thoughts as the Pelican shook from an unknown source, "Chief!" yelled the pilot, "Debris from the battle and the destruction of High Charity is falling out of orbit. The rear port engine's been hit, get set for a hard landing!"

Outside the Pelican bits of ship and Flood biomass tumbled past towards the ring and as the ring seemed to rush up towards them John tensed himself for the inevitable crash. There was a solid thwump as the dropship fell nose first into a huge snow drift. Everyone pulled themselves out from where they had been thrown by the impact and looked around, "Everyone okay?" the pilot asked, stunned that they had all survived the impact as had the Pelican as the engines

were still running. "We're all okay", called John, "Kelly, Linda, the Arbiter and I will keep going to the control room, Fred I need you to stay here and dig the dropship out, it's our only way off the ring." Acknowledgment lights flashed in response to his orders and the group split up.

Looking around where they had crashed John suddenly realised that the ecosystem on the new ring must have been incomplete since the original Installation 07's control room had been near a temperate jungle, not in the snow. Just ahead of them was the bottom of the pyramidal structure leading up to the control room. All around them were bits of Flood and ship debris. They moved off up the central ramp leading all the way up the structure, at the top they were greeted by a truly terrible sight. Lined up in front of the door was a row of Flood forms. Upon seeing the Spartans they charged, the three man team opened fire cutting down several of them before they got close, the Arbiter leapt in and began slicing through the monstrosities with his energy sword. In a few minutes of intense fighting the Flood forms were paste on the floor and the group approached the door.

Suddenly, a green light illuminated the closed door ahead of them and a pulsing hum emanated from behind them. "Reclaimers, I see you have returned to my installation, in a sense, now tell me. What do you intend to do with this ring?" _249 Shamed Diversion_ asked as he floated down behind them, flanked by a Sentinel pair. "Light it." John said simply, as he turned back towards the door, "Excellent!" cooed _Diversion_ and the door slid open to allow them entry and he followed them in.

The control room as a huge cavern, the walls were hewn from stone but were smooth, and curved, not jagged. A glass walkway ran around the circumference of the room and on a central platform, held up by no obvious means, was a glass platform linked to the outer catwalk by light bridges. They approached the bridge and marched across it, the bridge making a slight hissing sound as they stepped on it. As they approached the console the Monitor produced the T-shaped Index and it floated down in John's outstretched hand. He walked up to the console and inserted the Index. The console lit up and a huge beam of light shot up into the hole in the roof then died away, the largest holographic button on the console, _Diversion_ hovered closer to speak, "Reclaimer, that button will activate the ring, destroying the local infestation but I advise you wait for your fleet to leave before you do so or they shall all perish." John nodded and opened up a comm channel to the _Shadow of Intent_ and the _Spirit of Justice_, "We've reached the control room and my team will be heading up in the Pelican, one they are onboard leave immediately through Portal back to Earth. This is Spartan 117, over and out." he signed off the comm and turned to Linda, Kelly and the Arbiter, "You need to leave, now" he explained, "I'll stay behind and activate the ring. It's been an honour." Both Kelly and Linda depolarized their visors and the hurt on their faces stopped John in his tracks. "John, you know we won't let you do this." Kelly said, her words cutting through him like butter. "You have to Kelly, do make me make it an order." John said, gently encouraging them away.

"Master Chiefâ€¦ John, the honour was all ours." Linda said on the behalf of both herself, and Kelly, who looked likely to have a breakdown, the Arbiter looked to him and spoke, "While we did not fight together for long it has been an honour for me to do so, you

will not be forgotten." he said sadly as he turned and left with the other two.

As they left John turned and sat down against the control panel, waiting for the call that they had returned to the ship and were leaving. He sat there and waited for close to an hour before the call came in. "Master Chief, this is Captain John Price of the UNSC Spirit of Justice, we're heading for the Portal now, I wanted you to know, that throughout all you and your Spartan have done for humanity in the last twenty seven years of war you never asked for praise but now, as I know we are about to lose you, I just wanted to say thank you. For everything. Goodbye."

John couldn't think of a reply as the comm was cut off and Diversion turned to him, "Reclaimer, the time has come." Without a word he stood up and walked slowly to the console. "Goodbye." he whispered and pushed down the button with his hand. He felt a rumble as the phase pulse generators powered up and the beam at the centre of the room opened up again with a single huge burst.

From the Ark the Flood could see the many generators around the ring gather their energy in a point at the centre, the final beam shot up and impacted on the central gathering. A white light lit up and slowly spread out in all directions and the vision of every living creature on the Ark and the ring went dark.

12. Chapter 11

****The Final Solution: October 22nd 2552****

****Location: Near Incomplete Halo Ring, Above The Ark****

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From the Ark the Flood could see the many generators around the ring gather their energy in a point at the centre, the final beam shot up and impacted on the central gathering. A white light lit up and slowly spread out in all directions and the vision of every living creature on the Ark and the ring went dark.

****Back From The Dead: Time/Date Error****

****Location: Unknown Location****

The world was dark as he came back to his senses. He was confused, death wasn't meant to hurt, but he was in a lot of pain, he thought back to the events leading up to his current situation. He had been in the Control Room and fired the Halo ring then things had gone dark with a golden glow around the edges and he had assumed himself dead. Clearly that wasn't the case as he dragged himself to his feet and looked around.

He felt dizzy as nausea swept over him as he stood. His surroundings reminded him of the areas of the Ark untouched by the Flood. Huge forests, lakes and mountains rolled out into the distance. As he looked up, following the terrain up and suddenly realised the construction he was in. He was inside a sphere with beautiful scenery and towering mountains, in the centre of the huge sphere was a small, yet stunningly bright, sun. It was instantly clear that the structure was the work of the Forerunners due to the imposing structures so characteristic of the ancient race.

As he John looked around he tried to spot the nearest building and realised there was one within a reasonable distance. Using his faceplate's rangefinder he zoomed in on it and got a distance of three kilometers. "Good", he muttered to himself, "At least I won't have far to walk.", as he began the trek to the waypoint he had marked on his HUD.

As he drew to within a kilometer of his destination he began to hear a strange mechanical thrumming. He instantly recognised the sound but couldn't place where he knew it from, as he ran back through his memories it suddenly clicked. A Sentinel. His suspicions were confirmed as a Sentinel, larger than the ones he had seen on Halo and the Ark but also more sleek and vicious in appearance, came soaring over the tree tops towards him. It slowed when it saw him and descended to his level, it's central eye glowing a ferocious red. It began issuing a series of strange sounds, vaguely reminiscent of the sounds made by Mendicant Bias when they had first met, the Forerunner language. "This is Spartan 117 and I want to speak to the Monitor of this Installation. I am a Reclaimer." The Sentinel simply hovered for a moment, seemingly contemplating his words, until suddenly it began

to speak in English, "Greetings Reclaimer, I am 032 _Offensive Bias_. How is it that you have come to my Installation, what is your purpose here?" The voice reminded him of _Mendicant Bias_ but it seemed to lack the same emotional quality in it's voice that _Mendicant_ had had. John pondered the question carefully before replying, "I don't know, when I fired the Halo ring everything went black and I woke up here." he explained. The Sentinel floated in silence for a moment until _Offensive Bias_' voice returned, "Very well Reclaimer, I must meet with you. Follow this Super Sentinel." ordered the Forerunner AI and with that the machine turned and shot off the way it had come.

Quickly gathering himself John grabbed his rifle from the ground beside him, attaching it to the magnetic clip on his back and ran after the Sentinel.

It soon became clear that _Offensive Bias_ had underestimated John's abilities as he soon caught up with the Sentinel, traveling much slower than he was capable of. The machine issued a cheerful bleep and sped up to match his speed. The two continued going faster and faster until eventually they reached the Spartan's top speed, sixty kph, and they shot off into the distance.

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They had been running for around an hour, crossing small sections of desert, snow fields and woodland until finally the Sentinel began to slow down. Suddenly the path seemed to open up and a large, imposing structure, hundreds of feet high towered above him. It was vaguely similar in appearance to control room on Halo, but it was much taller, more pointed and wasn't built into a cliff. The base pyramid had a much shallower gradient than further up and leading up the centre was a narrow path. John drew his assault rifle and let it rest in his hands, ready to bring it up in case it became necessary. The Sentinel accelerated ahead of him and towards the central path. John hurried to follow and as he began up the ramp and glanced back he was certain he saw a deformed shape. Shaking it off as a misshapen tree he hurried on, anxious not to lose the Sentinel.

As the ramp leveled out he looked up and saw, perched on the side of the main tower, was a small glass observation room, there was a scintillating pale blue beam shooting up towards the bottom of the room from far below the bowels of the tower. As the Spartan approached he saw the Sentinel hovering beside the beam and it seemed to beckon to him to go into the beam with a motion of its central eye. Cautiously John approached the beam and drew an empty magazine from his belt and tossed it into the beam. It seemed to hover for a split second and then shot up, faster than his eye could track. Realising that it must be a gravity lift, similar yet far superior to the Covenant counterpart, he stepped into it and sped upwards.

He caught a brief glimpse of the landscape around him, including what looked to be a small space dock of some sort in the distance until suddenly his vision was cut off by his entrance into the observation dome. He rose about half a meter above the floor as the plate covering the grav lift cover slid over the hole and he landed on the now shut cover. For the first time he looked around the room. At the far end of the room was a huge glass window through which could be seen the sweeping shapes of the landscape and the small sun above. The room itself was fairly small but big enough to accommodate, John,

two Super Sentinels, four basic Sentinels and in the centre of the group of machines a sort of dais with all sorts of cables, tubes and lights coming into and going out of it. In the centre of this was a small, yet recognizable shape, it was clearly one of the Forerunner Monitors but it had a slightly more elaborate chassis and it was coated in Forerunner glyphs. The central eye, as well as streaks along the side of the central hub, was a deep, blood colored red and, despite it not being an actual eye, John felt he was being either glared at or scrutinized by the AI. "Greetings Reclaimer." it said, the voice had changed, no longer did it seem as intrigued or content as it had through the Sentinel. The Monitor's voice had taken on a gravelly quality and was filled with a quiet, subtle fury, "When you arrived here you claimed you did know why you were here, the question has since been answered for me. I am surprised, and more than a little disappointed that you chose to ally yourself with the Flood and helped them to infiltrate this secure, and very important, facility. Protocol dictated that the Flood you brought must be destroyed and Sentinels are doing so even as we speak. You have betrayed the Forerunners and everything they, we, stood for in bringing the parasite here. Therefore in accordance to the decree of the Ecumene Council you are sentenced to immediate execution. Do you have any last words _Reclaimer_" the Monitor asked putting heavy and sarcastic emphasis on the word. John slowly backed away, "Look, I don't know what's going on but you've made some sort of mistake, I was brought here after activating a Halo ring to _destroy_ the Flood, not bring them hereâ€¦ wherever here is."

"Do not lie to me Reclaimer." the AI retorted. Suddenly the dozens of tubes and cables connected to the Monitor's dais detached with a snap his and fell to the floor. From the centre the AI began to rise up from its 'throne' and moved towards him, the central eye glowing a brighter and more ferocious red. Backing away further John stepped back onto the grav lift pad to no effect. The Monitor seemed to shudder and John ducked with the speed only a Spartan was capable of and dodged the red hot beam that shot through the space he had just occupied and even though it had missed him he felt his armors' internal temperature rise dramatically. Recognizing that he couldn't win the fight with Super Sentinels and the basic Sentinels also moving to engage him he attached his rifle to his back and got into a half crouch and burst forwards suddenly reaching an impressive speed and denting the floor where he had pushed off. As he charged down the room sentinels were forced to scatter before him and he heard the angry cry of _Offensive Bias_ as ran and with a leap smashed through the glass observation window and plummeted down.

He landed in a roll to take some of the impact but he still hit the ground with force that would have turned a normal human into paste. He forced himself to stand and move on, ignoring the pain in his entire body as he spat blood onto the inside of his visor. By the time it had dribbled down a short way down his visor he was already running as fast as he could away from _Offensive Bias' _Citadel and from behind him he could hear the unmistakable hum of the Sentinels and the lighter, smoother sound of the Monitor. Up ahead of him he could see a small cave entrance and seeing how small and inconspicuous it was a ran towards it and as he approached he dropped down and slid along on the back of his hip using he momentum to propel him through the small hole and into the cave. He lay there, rifle trained on the entrance, not breathing for several seconds as the whirring of the Sentinels and Monitor came closer and then got more and more distant.

He let out a relieved sigh and slumped to the ground, the agony of his injuries suddenly becoming clear. He pulled off his helmet and spat up the last of the blood from his mouth onto the ground. He reached into the pouch on his side he had taken with him to the Ark and produced a can of biofoam. He inserted it into the port on his armor and pumped himself full of the antiseptic expanding foam polymer. He lay back on the cave floor, getting back his breath.

He instantly felt a wave of fatigue and realised he hadn't slept for more than an hour since the Spirit of Justice had exited slipspace above the Ark so, confident he wouldn't die in his sleep, he moved up against the cave wall and allowed himself to fall asleep.

****Found At Last: Time/Date Error, Estimated Date: October 23rd 2552****

****Location: Inside Unknown Forerunner Installation****

The world slowly resolved back into focus for John as he awoke in the cave he had fallen asleep in he thought back to the dream he had had, in it he had found himself somehow returned to Earth from his current location although the details were foggy. After arriving he had looked down at the planet and seen it green and brown and coated in Flood biomass, the atmosphere was a dull brown and suddenly he realised he had a Flood infection from burrowing into his chest and as he had mutated into a Flood combat form he had awoken once more. He slipped his helmet back on and looked at the time on his HUD and saw he had been sleeping for six hours. He dragged himself up off the floor and stretched and looked around. He clearly hadn't been found by Offensive Bias or his Sentinels and as he set off to head deeper into the cave he unslung his rifle and held it at the ready, activating his flash light and scanning the corners for any threats. Suddenly from behind him he thought he heard a strange squelching sound and he whirled around to see nothing there.

Assuming it was simply his nerves he pressed on until the cave opened up into a slightly larger chamber with a small beam of light showing through a crack in the wall. As he approached the crack he heard a dull thud from behind him. Before he could even turn half way around he felt a massive impact on his back and he was flung forward into the cracked wall. He hit it with enough force that the wall shuddered and smashed open, flinging him into the outside world. He looked up dazed back at the cave, his eyes already adjusted from the dim light in the cave to the bright outside world. From inside the cave lumbered a form he recognised and dreaded. It was a huge Flood tank form, bigger than any of the ones he had seen before. It lurched out into the open and seemed disorientated for a moment until suddenly it was struck by a crimson energy beam and it seemed to burst outwards, spraying the area, and John, in smoldering bits of Flood biomass.

John looked up to see the source of the beam and hovering a few metres above him looking down was Offensive Bias. "At last I have found you Reclaimer!" the AI exclaimed gleefully and descended to his level followed by a few micro-Sentinels which began cauterizing the dead Flood form. "I am terribly sorry for the confusion last time we met Reclaimer, upon closer inspections of the relevant data I have concluded that it was due to an error in the system that the Flood gained access to this facility and not due to your betrayal, I

apologise for any inconvenience." John was stunned. The Monitor had, just seven hours ago tried to kill him and had spent much of the intervening time hunting him. He was speechless and he just said the first thing that came to mind, "Ok." he surprised even himself with that and the Monitor seemed gleeful at his mercy. "Excellent Reclaimer, I must explain how you got here and what must now be done. After you fired the Halo ring, as per the original plan laid down by the Forerunner, you were instantly transported through a small slipspace portal here, this Installation where I went after completing the final command I was given by my makers. When you were brought here, for unknown reasons a large quantity of Flood specimens were also transported here. At first I thought you had brought them as you know but following my analysis of our brief conversation and the fact that the Flood also seemed confused as to how they got here, I concluded you were innocent. I spent the last five hours looking for you and it would seem the Flood did as well." John paused for a minute, shocked at how easily the Monitor could change its mind. "We must hurry Reclaimer, you know as well as I that the Flood must be stopped. My makers placed a weapon, similar in design to the Halo array but on a much smaller scale, within this Installation. It is designed to destroy any living creatures within this sphere but will also transport the firer to safety. We must hurry and fire the weapon Reclaimer, I shall transport us to the controls." Golden rings of light surrounded the Spartan's body and he instantly felt nauseous.

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As the world slowly came back into focus John instantly looked up and around to check for any threats. Hovering beside him was _Offensive Bias_. "Excellent Reclaimer you are awake, we are now inside the control room for the weapon, once you fire it you shall be taken from here to a location I cannot predict."

John stood and approached a huge bank of controls and scanned them over, suddenly from behind him was an almighty crash and a cacophony of crazed, inhuman roars. He span around and saw what must have once been the entrance to the control room was in pieces on the floor, the thick metal smashed to pieces. Stood beyond the doorway was a huge group of Flood lead by a few tank forms. _Offensive Bias_ opened fire with his laser burning a few of the Flood forms before they knew what was happening, the Forerunner AI swiveled round to face John, "Hurry Reclaimer, I will hold them off for as long as I can!" John turned back to the console, and tried to work out what holographic button he needed to press, with the Flood bearing down on him and _Offensive Bias_ yelling at him he desperately slammed his hand down on the biggest button he could see.

There was a intense, deep bass that reverberated through the room and he was thrown forwards, before he could smash into the console the world was bathed in bright light and then, like a switch had been thrown, the lights went out in John's eyes and everything was once again, dark.

13. Chapter 12

**Not Again!: Time/Date Error, Estimated Date: October 23rd
2552**

****Location: Unknown Location, The Ark****

John groaned as he sat up, clutching his throbbing head. He was getting fed up, for the third time in just a few hours he was waking up from unconsciousness in an unknown location. He looked around and breathed a sigh of relief, as he looked around there was no sign of the control room he had been in or the Flood. Wherever he was it was still clearly Forerunner due to the forests and mountains in the area. Looking at the horizon he suddenly realised where he had been dropped. The Ark. He looked up into the sky to see that the Halo ring which had once occupied the heavens was gone. In its place was a Covenant fleet the likes of which he had never seen, even in the final battles of the Ark campaign.

There were easily over a thousand ships, swarming in the skies. It surprised him that the Covenant were able to have such a huge fleet after the Elites had pulled out of the alien conglomerate and the number of ships the loyalists had lost in the naval battles above the Ark. Maybe, he hoped, this was the last of the Covenant. Hiding outside the Milky Way above an alien construct nowhere near human space. It was, he realised, unlikely. Knowing that the Covenant both worshipped the Forerunners and used their technology. The fleet was probably plundering the Ark for useful tech to take back to continue in the war. He had to get on board a ship and take it. If not to save himself some time getting home then to get back and warn Earth.

There would be no easy way of doing so but he did have one option: draw the attention of a Covenant dropship and draw it to his location, take control of the ship and use it to get to the fleet above. He scanned the skies for any sign of a Covenant dropship, when suddenly he realised that there was one headed straight for his location, presumably having detected his arrival and wondering if he was some Forerunner treasure. "Ha!" he thought, all I need to do is hide until they disembark and sneak aboard.

Looking around for cover so that he wouldn't be instantly spotted and give away his anonymity, he saw a likely looking fir tree that towered above him. Him leapt up into the lower branches and held a subconscious breath. The thrumming sound of Covenant engines cut through the sounds of the forest as the dropship descended into the clearing. The sides opened up and a squad of five brutes dropped out. There were three minors, a major and a chieftain wielding a gravity hammer. The chieftain barked out an unintelligible order and John's translation software whirred to life, "Bring out the sacrificial meal. We shall eat before the gods!" John didn't know what they meant by 'meal' but he didn't like the sound of it. The true horror dawned on him as a single human was dropped from the Phantom and cowered before the chieftain.

The huge brute spoke again, "Human scum, we shall feast on your flesh in the name of the gods, and you shall watch." John was unsure whether the translation software was right, the man couldn't watch if he was being eatenâ€¦ suddenly the realization dawned on him. They were going to take bits off him while he was still alive and he would watch them eat him. The brute lifted the terrified man up the shirt of what John suddenly realised was ONI uniform. "What was the Office of Naval intelligence doing here?" he thought to himself. The man screamed as he was thrown to the other brutes.

Unable to stand by any longer John dropped from the tree in total silence, a combat knife in each hand. He charged the major and one of the minors, plunging a knife into each of their thick necks and pulled back. There was a spray of blood and the two brutes dropped to the ground. Another minor lifted up it's head, blood from the mans arm dribbled from it's maw and it let out an angry roar, dropping the unfortunate ONI officer. John leapt onto the brute bringing down both knives into the area above it's rib cage. He pulled down with the knives and with a sickly crunch they plunged down the torso of the brute, ripping muscle, crushing bone and showering the area in puddles of blood.

The remaining minor was more prepared and brought down a mighty fist over John's head, knocking him to the ground. Dazed, he looked up and saw the drooling face of the brute over him preparing to bring down it's fist for another punch. John spun to one side dodging the blow. The minor spun with him smashing a fist into the small of his back, blood sprayed out of John's mouth, coating the inside of his visor. Unable to pause to recover he desperately spun around rammed the blade of his knife up to the hilt into the eye of the brute. It roared for a moment until he twisted the blade and the alien went limp. He shoved the body off him and pulled himself to his feet with a tree. He fell back to his knees. It was, as it turned out, this that saved his life. For just as he fell there was a might whadoosh and the tree before him smashed into splinters. He forced his screaming body to roll away as the tree teetered and fell, knocking the still hovering dropship to the ground.

John wheeled around to face the furious chieftain, assault rifle in hand, he pulled the trigger and bullets pinged off the shield as he opened fire. The brute roared again and brought the hammer down with an almighty crash, John spun away just in time but knew he was fighting a losing battle. The massive chieftain stepped towards him unsteadily until suddenly it fell forward, a knife John had dropped protruding from it's spine and a blood soaked ONI agent stood behind him.

John let out a sign of relief and pulled himself to his feet, pain lancing up his legs and he doubled over coughing up blood over the floor. The ONI officer produced a small medical patch and a bottle of antiseptic and began cleaning the bite wound on his arm, wincing slightly as he dabbed the wound with the antiseptic and layered on the bandage. The man then turned to John, producing a small can of biofoam and offered it to him. John gratefully accepted it and stuck the nozzle into the port on his armor.

Now that he was full of foam and able to speak he turned to the officer. "Thanks", he said calmly in the monotone voice the Spartans were famous for, "but what's ONI doing here?" The man slowly looked up to John, "Take your helmet off and we'll talk Spartan, I don't want to speak to your visor." John glanced at the insignia on the man's uniform, the bars of a lieutenant. Hesitantly he pulled his helmet off, the officer said nothing but his eyes showed the shock of John's face. The Spartan pulled an antiseptic wipe from his pack and wiped the drying blood from the inside of his helmet and the golden face plate. Not bothering to wipe the blood from his face he turned back to the lieutenant who nodded in approval.

"My name is Lieutenant Elias Haverson, I was sent here by UNSC Fleetcom to investigate the Ark site, it's a wealth of technological

opportunities for humanity. We arrived in one of the new shielded prowlers but when we arrived we found this fleet", he gestured up, "already here, there were two ships sent and the captain onboard my prowler assumed space above the Ark would be clear. When we arrived out of slipspace we were instantly boarded by the brutes and taken prisoner aboard one of their carriers: Zealous Exultation. I think the other prowler was running dark when it came out of slipspace but I think of the crew from my prowler are already dead, the brutes take a few down to the Ark each day and release them so that they can then chase them and have some religious meal. That's what they were going to do to me until you showed up." John took in the new information, processing the newest problems and formulating a plan in his mind.

Finally, after several minutes thinking, he spoke, "I have a plan."

****Boarding Action: October 23rd 2552****

****Location: Surface of the Ark****

For a moment Haverson looked suspicious but then motioned for the Spartan to continue. "We need a ride out of here and as far as I can see the only ship we can get to is Covenant, the best bet would be to board the ship you were being held on, at least that way any surviving crew will be saved. We clearly can't get onboard the second prowler, for one they don't have hangars and even if they did our boarding would reveal their location to the Covenant." John explained, Haverson looked contemplative for a moment before he began to speak. "I like the plan Chief but how do we get back to the ship?"

John motioned to the dropship, the engines of which were still running trying to drag itself out from under the tree. "Are you crazy Chief? That dropship is stuck under a tree!" Haverson called. "Let me deal with that." John replied. He turned towards the dead body of the chieftain and relieved it of the gravity hammer, he wielded the massive weapon and out of the corner of his vision saw Haverson staring at him, shocked. He approached the part of the tree crushing the phantom and brought down the hammer with all his might. There was a familiar sound as his momentum was transferred by the hammer into a gravity pulse and moments later the huge tree trunk was crushed into splinters. The dropship's engines thrummed and it rose several metres off the ground and hovered in place.

John turned back to Haverson who looked silently impressed but approached the gravity lift and rose up into the belly of the dropship. John followed him and was just in time to see him plunge the knife he had pulled from the corpse of chieftain into the neck of the unconscious pilot. "I think this is yours." Haverson called back to John who was crouching in the area just behind the cockpit and he tossed him the blood stained knife. John deftly caught it and in a smooth motion slotted it back into the sheath on his shoulder piece.

He threw the corpse of the pilot out of the troop bay down with the rest of the dead brutes. As an after thought John told Haverson he was going to the ground for a moment. He went between the bodies of the brutes grabbing up any energy daggers, grenades and weapons he could find. They would come in useful later for arming the remaining

prisoners onboard the carrier. As he rode back up the gravity lift into the belly of the Phantom the cover slid over the grav lift and the sides to the troop bay swung up and shut with a hiss and the interior pressurized.

Haverson gestured over his shoulder for John to join him in the cockpit. "I've had lots of training on flying these", Haverson explained, "the Elites helped with that after we joined forces so I can lie us up to the ship but after that my effectiveness is lessened, I'm not a soldier, I'm not a Marine and I'm certainly no Spartan. I'm an intelligence officer. I can use a rifle and throw a grenade but I need you to get us to the brig and then the bridge."

"Yes Sir." John confirmed and they both watched in silence as they rose through the atmosphere of the Ark and into space. The Covenant fleet swarmed around them, carriers, battle cruisers, destroyers and even a few of the massive super carriers. The tiny dropship maneuvered around the underside of ship after ship until finally they approached a carrier, one of the few ships present which showed no signs of battle damage. The dropship drew through the shield and into the hangar. Through the main view screen he could see a few jackals and grunts. He sighed in relief at the lack of brutes. Just as John turned to head down the gravity lift Haverson called back, "Chief, I have something important to give you." he handed a small electronic chip into his gauntleted hand, "Do you know what this is?" haverson asked. John nodded, "Sir, it's the core for a shipboard AI but there's nothing on it."

Haverson nodded and continued, "That's correct, it's the core for the AI we had on our ship, it was given to us by Doctor Catherine Halsey before we left Earth. I didn't tell you before but we didn't just come here to look for tech, we came for you too Chief and the Doctor gave us this. We were meant to give the AI to you but I think the Covenant captured her. You'll need access the ship's systems and upload her to the chip and your armor. Good luck Spartan." Haverson saluted andf John returned the salute, then turned and descended down the gravity lift the hangar floor below.

As he left the dark interior of the Phantom he looked around, pointing his rifle at the nearest jackal, which was foolish enough to face the other way, and pulled the trigger. The inside of the jackal's energy shield was splattered with purple blood and the body fell to the ground. The gun fire alerted the other aliens to his present and they turned from inspecting a plasma coil. Taking advantage of their location John turned his rifle in their direction and opened fire. The grunts and jackals looked confused as the rounds shot past them, a clear miss. A moment too late one jackal turned to see where the bullets at gone, it squawked and dived away but it was too slow. The plasma coil went from a light blue glow to a threatening shade of violet and hummed furiously like angry bees. Then it exploded bathing the hangar in purple light and engulfing the unfortunate Covenant in a roiling ball of purple and blue flames and plasma.

John surveyed the wreckage and fired a short burst into the skull of the jackal which had dived away and just survived the explosion. Then, confident the local enemy forces were dealt with, he turned and looked around for the nearest console. He located it and remembered what he had been told by the techs about AI transfer. He placed his

hand to the panel and an ice cold presence filled his mind. "Hello there Master Chief", it said. The voice was cool and calm, reminding the Spartan of Doctor Halsey herself, "My name", the AI continued, "is Cortana."

****A New Friend: October 23rd 2552****

****Location: Onboard Covenant Carrier_ Zealous Exultation_****

"Hello Cortana." John replied, anxious to continue on his mission.

"It's nice to finally meet you John", the AI replied, "We can chat later but right now I believe you have a mission?" The Spartan nodded although the AI couldn't see him and walked off into the corridor. "I've downloaded full schematics of the ship and I'm overlaying a route and a waypoint for our destination on your HUD." the small waypoint icon flashed onto his HUD along with a thin line snaking along the floor and disappearing around the next corner, directions, he assumed. There was silence between the two as John jogged down the corridor, peppering any Covenant unfortunate enough to get in his way, full of holes.

"Cortana", John began, "How come I've been fighting through these corridors for ten minutes and all I've come across is a couple of grunts and jackals?" It was a few moments before she replied, "I've hacked the ship's systems and as far as I can determine the lack of opposition is because of a lack of Covenant personnel. After the battle of Earth and then the Ark they lost a huge number of warriors. The ships in this fleet are all manned with a skeleton crew and as far as I can see the only real opposition onboard are three pairs of hunters and thirty brutes. There are over a hundred grunts and only around a hundred jackals. Just enough to keep the ship in good order and in the sky." John grunted in response, although the number of troops onboard was small compared to the norm it was still a lot more than he could face in battle.

Unfortunately the brig was at the opposite end of the ship to the hangar they had landed in and as the numbers of troops steadily increased he realised that he must have been near the bridge. "Cortana, would there be any merit in me stopping off at the bridge on my way to the brig?" he asked, unwilling to pass up any possible opportunities.

"It could be useful actually, from the bridge I can gain access to all the ship's systems and possibly lock down a path between the bridge and the brig so no Covenant can access it. Then vent the atmosphere along there to kill any enemy troops already there. You could then walk straight to the brig and escort the prisoners back here." she explained her idea to him, "Lets do it." John agreed and Cortana overlay a new waypoint and line on his HUD leading him to the bridge.

As he approached the waypoint which seemed to e around the next corner he was cautious, enemy numbers had died down and things seemed eerily quiet. He turned around the final corner and standing at the entrance to the bridge was a pair of hunters which roared in anger as they saw the Spartan approach. They charged up their fuel rod cannons and launched out a pair of blasts which flew down the corridor after the retreating Spartan.

Just as he ducked back around the corner the blasts struck the wall behind him blasting a smoking black hole. Realising he couldn't win in a firefight he was forced to improvise he drew one of the incendiary grenades from his belt and activated it, then swiftly threw it around the corner to the feet of the armored behemoths. They yowled in rage as the grenade exploded and bathed them in flame and they screamed and inhuman bellow of pain and collapsed, the smell of burning flesh and smoke filled the corridor.

He stuck his head back around the corner to see the scene of devastation. Both hunters were a crumpled smoldering heap on the floor with bits of melted armor and smoking orange flesh. The corridor itself was ruined, there was a crater crater going all the way around where the hunters had been along with the body bits of a few grunts which had been killed in the blast. The crater running in a ring around the corridor must have been caused by the plasma grenades they had had going off. The door was blackened and as he approached it tried to slide open by seemed to jam and sparks sprayed from all around.

"Not bad." Cortana commented as she surveyed the devastation through his suit's cameras. "Not bad." he replied as he marched over to the door and grabbed hold of the centre of the gap where it had jammed in place and pulled with all his might. There was a metallic creaking and then it gave way, rather than opening it bent outwards into a gap just large enough for him to get through.

Stood in the centre of the room in ceremonial armor and wielding a particularly large gravity hammer was a brute chieftain, bigger than any brute he had seen before, it had grey fur which was stuck up in spikes or simply combed down. Upon seeing him it let out a roar, dropped the hammer, leant forward and charged at him on all fours.

John quickly retreated back behind the door, hoping to use it as cover against the rampaging brute but it was in vain. The rampaging alien barely even slowed as it smashed into the door and sent the Spartan flying down the corridor along with the remains of the door. It roared and beat it's chest, spittle flying around the place.

It leapt onto John and lifted him up with a massive furry hand and bashed him back into the wall. John brought his hands up desperately trying to rip the creatures hands from his neck but to no avail. His vision began to narrow and go dark at the edges and he tried to draw in a breath but his throat was totally constricted, he heard Cortana say something but everything sounded muffled to his oxygen deprived brain. Suddenly he heard the popping sound of his shields coming back online and there was a yowl and he felt his throat being released. He fell to the floor and looked up at the brute, his vision coming back as oxygen flooded his system and he drew in a ragged breath. The creature was wailing and clutch it's hand, a thin whips of smoke rising from the seared flesh. Cortana had stopped his shields charging and had brought the charge back all at once, scorching the hands of his attacker.

He staggered to his feet, knowing that if the brute recovered from it's pain he wouldn't have a chance. He summoned up the last of his strength and leapt at the wounded brute, knocking it to the ground and bringing it out of it's stupor. He swiftly punched it hard in the

face then, pulling the pin on a frag grenade lodged it into a gap between the armor plates. He leapt back off the brute and back round the corner just as an infuriated growl reverberated behind him followed by a whumph thenâ€¦ silence.

Easing back around the corner he saw the already wrecked corridor was coated in yet another layer of blood. The only thing left of the brute was the severed head, arms and legs all held together by the armor, but there was a bloody hollow of broken bones, meat and sinew where the torso of the beast had been.

Sidestepping the mangled corpse and the fires still flickering he clambered through the remains of the door and, finally, onto the bridge.

14. Chapter 13

****Cutting A Path: October 23rd 2552****

****Location: Onboard Covenant carrier _Zealous Exultation_****

"Chief, transfer me to the main bridge console so I can get to work." said Cortana through his helmet speaker. He marched over to the console and away from the ruined side of the bridge, he made to move the abandoned hammer out of the way but checked the motion and picked it up to attach to the magnetic clip on his back.

As he transferred Cortana to the bridge console her avatar popped up above the desk. She had a womanly figure, coloured different shades of blue and purple. Lines of coding streaked down her body almost too fast for his eye to track. She put her hands on her hips and looked down at him, "It's good to be in a ship, I have more room to move around and a little more freedom.", she said, half to herself, "I've already sealed off an almost direct route to the brig and sealed all the entrances onto that path, I'll vent the atmosphere in the surrounding corridors to kill any nearby Covenant. I'll stay here in the meantime, monitor the situation. You get to the brig and get them back here."

The Spartan nodded and turned to leave, "Send a transmission to Lieutenant Haverson, he's onboard the Phantom in the hangar bay I picked you up in. Tell him the situation and that I'll come and escort him to the bridge when I'm done." He marched from the bridge, rifle in hand.

As he headed down the corridor everything was eerily silent, there was no sound from anywhere due to the lack of atmosphere in surrounding corridors. As he neared the entrance to the brig there was a sudden grinding sound from above him. He looked up to see sparks tumbling down as whatever was above him cut through. He snuck back down the corridor to the nearest junction and round the corner to the sealed door, then stuck his head round the corner to watch.

The grinding continued until a small section of roof fell down with a crash followed by a pair of brutes. Looking down to his ammo pouch John drew out one of the three incendiary grenades he had left and lobbed it down the corridor. It rolled between the two brutes just as a third dropped down from above and then exploded into flames, the

screams of the burning brutes echoed up and down the corridor and one got closer, saw him and collapsed either from shock or from it's injuries.

When he walked back into the corridor no more enemies appeared and there was no more movement or sound except the flickering and crackling of the slowly dying fires. From his pack John drew out a length of trip wire, stuck a frag grenade to the lip of the hole and strung the trip wire across the gap, making sure that any enemies who came through the hole would have an explosive surprise.

"Cortana", John called, "I need you to evacuate the atmosphere from several decks either side of the corridor I'm and above and below, you should detect a breach between decks near my location, don't evacuate that area or I'll lose atmosphere here as well." Just as he turned to carry on he got a reply, "Already done Chief, but I thought you should know, I told Haverson but he refused to wait and is on his way to the bridge now." John cursed under his breath and flashed an acknowledgment light.

As the door opened into the brig he was greeted by a terrible sight, inside the room was a group of prisoners, or what had been a group of prisoners. Their corpses were mangled and most had huge bite marks ripped out of them, congealed blood in puddles around the floor. The brutes must have executed them after they were warned he was coming. "I've found the brig but all the prisoners are already dead, I was too late." he felt terrible, if only he hadn't stopped at the bridge he might have saved them. "Roger that Chief, Lieutenant Haverson is here and he wants to meet with you."

"On my way." he replied.

He sprinted back down the corridor towards the bridge, Cortana's voice had sounded urgent and she struck him as the sort of person, AI he corrected himself, who wasn't easily worried.

As he skidded around the final corner to the bridge the ship shook and he was almost thrown to the floor, he steadied himself against the wall and continued on. As he charged onto the bridge Haverson and Cortana were both watching the main display showing an array of Covenant ships warming up their plasma weapons. "Status." he called as he made his presence known. Cortana turned to him and answered simply, "Trouble."

****Retreat: October 23rd 2552****

****Location: Onboard Covenant carrier _Zealous Exultation_****

The bridge was tense as Cortana explained the situation to John, "Some Covenant on board managed to get out a message to the rest of the fleet, they know we're not friendly to them any more, they've opened fire. I've vented the atmosphere from everywhere on the ship now that I know we're the only survivors." John saw Haverson grimace at her words but then turned to the Spartan. "Master Chief, we need to get back to Earth asap, during my time here I discovered the Covenant has fitted experimental slipspace drive to some of the ships in this fleet, they're revolutionary but require a lot of power. We're charging the capacitors now so all we need to do is hold out until they're done. I want you on weapons, I'm on nav and Cortana is focusing on getting the slipspace drive ready."

John nodded and silently stood over the weapons console, it was covered in Covenant script but suddenly he felt Cortana's presence in his mind, "I'll overlay translations of the control so you know what you're doing." she chuckled in his ear, Haverson left no the wiser to their conversation and he stared in amazement at how the Spartan seemed to be able to use the Covenant controls as if he had spent years doing so.

The plasma turrets warmed along the length of the ship and pulse lasers shot at Seraphs bugging the huge vessel. The turrets spewed forth great volleys of plasma at the other Covenant ships, smashing into their shields and after a moment burnt through and singed off the top layer of hull. The enemy ships returned fire and the carrier bucked like a crazed mule from the impacts. "Slipspace capacitors charged, hold onto something gents!" Cortana yelled over the sound of the fighting and suddenly motes of light appeared in space all around the ship, they grew until they merged into a swirling balloon which engulfed the ship. Then they collapsed and the ship was gone.

John collapsed to the floor once they were safely in slipspace, his copious wounds suddenly all flaring to life and pain, he grimaced pulled off his visor and lay back on the deck, the cooling sensation he felt as his head pressed against the cool metal soothing for his throbbing headache. "Cortana, Lieutenant", he called to them, "I'm going to catch up on some sleep, let me know if there are anyâ€|" his voice trailed off as he fell asleep.

Cortana looked down at him with a mixture of amusement and concerns, "Lieutenant", she called, "Would you be so kind as to inject some biofoam into the ports on his armor, he may look and sound okay but Doctor Halsey warned me he never admits to an injury, this may be our one chance to get some biofoam into him." Haverson nodded thoughtfully and leaned down with his last can of biofoam and stuck it into each port on the Mjolnir armor in turn. He produced a handheld medical scanner from his pack and linked it to the armor, instantly medical diagnostics scrolled across the screen. "Shitâ€|" murmured Haverson as he surveyed the injuries of the sleeping Spartan. Four broken ribs, two cracked ribs, damaged kidney, lacerations of the liver, ripped tendons, pulled ligaments, strained muscles, ripped muscles and more cuts and bruises than he had ever seen on one person.

He turned, stunned to Cortana, who simply shrugged her shoulders in a go figure motion. "Good news is our eta for Earth is two days so we may as well get settled." Haverson grunted a confirmation and settled down against the wall of the bridge and promptly fell asleep.

****Honey, I'm Home: October 25th 2552****

****Location: Onboard Covenant carrier _Zealous Exultation_****

John's eyes opened blearily and he looked around, he was still on the bridge of the carrier where he had fallen asleep. As he sat up and looked round he saw Haverson awake and standing by the main console reviewing some sort of data with Cortana. It only took her a moment to see he was up and called to him "Morning sleepy head, did you sleep well?"

He grunted back in a voice which showed he had just woken up, "No thanks to your driving, yes." Cortana gave him a teasing smile and motioned for him to join them at the console. As he approached the console Cortana explained the situation to him, "You've been asleep for two days solid", she explained, "We're almost at Earth now and I've sent a message ahead to warn them we're coming. The Covenant already know Earth's location so I didn't bother with the Cole Protocol." John nodded and the three stood in silence and waited for their arrival.

Several tense minutes later the ship shuddered and they exited slipspace just above Earth. They looked out of the view screen at the planet in horror. In orbit were hundreds of ships, both Covenant Separatist and UNSC alike, but there were other ships. They seemed to trail brown debris as they flew towards the Allied ships. The Flood. The comm hissed online and the panicked face of Lord Hood appeared on the side screen but he seemed to relax a little when he saw who was on the other end of the video link. "Chief, Haverson, Cortana.", he breathed in shock, "We thought you were dead!" he quickly composed himself. "As you can see the Flood is back, since you left they've attacked the Elite home world Sanghelios and now they've come to Earth. We've been under attack for hours trying to plug holes in the fleet but even with the combined Sangheili and human fleets we still don't have enough ships. Yours will make a welcome addition but I don't want you formed up with the rest of the fleet. You're going to have the dangerous job of taking the fight to the Flood. The biggest Flood ships are still holding back so I want you to focus on the smaller ships buffeting our line then we can launch an attack on the main ships."

John didn't like the way the Admiral assumed command of their ship without bothering to ask any questions about what had happened to them but he knew a mere master chief petty officer couldn't even consider questioning orders from an Admiral. Haverson was the first to speak "Yes Sir, but I thought you should know there is a Covenant fleet, hundreds strong, mustering above the Ark artifact and most probably planning to attack Earth." Hood nodded and considered before replying "If the Covenant arrive before the Flood are destroyed we may as well give up, there's nothing we can do for now." The look on his face was pained as he cut the connection.

"Cortana, you heard the Admiral's orders, bring the ship to combat ready and charge the plasma lances." ordered Haverson

"Yes Sir", Cortana replied, "Bringing ship in line to-. Lieutenant we have an incoming communicate from the UNSC _Spirit of Justice_."

Before he could think John blurted out "Patch it through!" Both Cortana and Haverson turned to look at him, amusement on their faces and John was grateful for his reflective visor to mask his face. "Yes _Sir!_" Cortana replied, giving him a mock salute before she disappeared and was replaced by the avatar of another AI, Sarah.

Welcome back to UNSC space Master Chief, Captain Price would talk to you himself but he's a little busy helping coordinate our defenses. The other Spartans we have on board, 104, 058 and 087 have requested a transfer to your vessel due to your lack of personnel. I have no qualms with the idea and it could help you to fly that thing but I

need the permission of your commander." Before John could reply Haverson cut him off "It would be a pleasure to have the Spartans onboard, we're running on a skeleton crew as it is so any extra personnel would be greatly appreciated."

Sarah nodded and with what he swore was a chuckle cut the link. Haverson turned to John "Chief", he began, "I want you to go and wait in the hangar for your fellows to arrived and when they do escort them to the bridge."

"Yes Sir." John replied, saluted and left the bridge for the hangar.

As he walked he force himself to calm down, he had found himself developing and irrational hatred of the lieutenant and this worried him, he had never had problems with his temper before and he made a mental note to keep his emotions in check.

When he finally arrived in the hangar bay he was awarded a view of the battle between Allied and Flood ships, there were more MAC rounds, plasma torpedoes and Archer missiles flying through the dark than he could hope to count. The Allied forces were holding there own for now but it would be a close fight.

As the Exultation changed course he saw several plasma torpedoes coming from the direction the carrier's turrets and they smashed into the nearest Flood ship, an old UNSC frigate. It felt strange to John to be onboard what was a Covenant ship firing plasma torpedoes and what was a UNSC ship. He half winced as the plasma projectiles impacted the much smaller ship and cleaved it in half despite knowing the ship was now the enemy.

The Allied fleet had taken up positions in high geosynchronous orbit above the planet and the near blanket of ships was just about holding it's own against the Flood. He could see the Spirit of Justice plasma lances searing from it's turrets and occasionally MAC rounds flying across the battlefield and pulverizing Flood ships.

As he zoomed in on his faceplate the tiny dot of a Pelican dropship could be seen, engines flaring, as it crossed the vast distance between the Justice and Exultation. Every so often the tiny ship was forced to do a barrel roll or swing off to one side to dodge plasma, MAC rounds and missiles that came a little too close. As one enemy plasma round passed close to the Pelican he saw the engines partially melt and the dropship spun out of control, now nearing the carrier he could easily make out what was left of the engines flaring at max burn to try and get them to the hangar.

Time seemed to slow as the dropship approached the hangar entrance, showing no sign of slowing, roared through the bay and embedded itself with a huge crash and the sound of tortured metal in the wall at the far end of the hangar bay. Fearful for his Spartans' lives he ran over to the crash site and leapt up to the back hatchway of the crumpled Pelican. He got his hands into the small gap in the hatch made by the crash and pulled. For a moment nothing happened then with a metallic groan the hatch gave way and three sets of Mjolnir armor slumped through the gap.

John instantly synced his armor with theirs and brought up team bio signs. He breathed a sigh of relief. They all had broken bones and

some degree of internal bleeding but most importantly they were alive and had steady, strong heartbeats. He activated his comm unit and called the bridge "The Spartans arrived but their Pelican was damaged and crashed at high speed in the hangar, they're all alive but have internal bleeding and broken bones."

"Roger that Chief", Cortana's voice came over the comm, "Can you carry them to the bridge where Lieutenant Haverson can assess their condition, he has, fortunately, had advance medical training." John flashed his acknowledgment light, not pleased that the ONI officer would be giving his Spartan medical attention but he had little choice.

With brute strength John swung the unconscious forms of Kelly and Fred over both shoulders and carried Linda bridal style, her being the lightest, and began the walk to the bridge.

****It Followed Me Home: October 25th 2552****

****Location: Onboard Covenant carrier _Zealous Exultation_****

John watched worriedly as Haverson carefully removed the Mjolnir armor from the injured Spartans and began treating their injuries. Using a sterile field generator he had produced from his pack he had began performing surgery to seal up their internal bleeding then, unable to do anything for their broken ribs but wrap bandages around them, he sealed up the incisions and left them to wake up of their own accord.

He wiped his hands with an antiseptic wipe and turned back to the display screen. "Cortana, status." he ordered.

"The Flood ships just keep coming, their numbers seem to be inexhaustible. I've kept this ship taking down their smaller ships with no problems but if this keeps up the Flood will eventually overrun our defenses." Her voice sounded defeated and she looked down. Haverson sighed and moved to open up a link to Lord Hood but his action was cut short as warning lights strobed around the bridge and sirens started up. "What's going on?" a voice called from the other side of the room. Fred had woken up. Cortana swiftly answered the question "Multiple inbound slipspace ruptures, I'm still calculating the figures but initial estimates are at over five hundred ships." She was cut short as every inch of space around the planet and beyond seemed to boil as motes of light appeared everywhere, illuminating the momentarily motionless fleets in a pale blue aura. The light faded and everywhere John looked he saw Covenant ships. Dozens of super carriers, carriers, destroyers, frigates, battle cruisers and light cruisers. There was silence on the bridge as they stared out at the armada before them, even the Flood was motionless in the face of such fire power.

The dozens of the Covenant ships began to glow a bright purple-blue as the lateral plasma lines began to charge up, at almost exactly the same moment over a hundred plasma torpedoes soared out of the ships. To the surprise of all present the ones which had appeared to be heading for the UNSC ships curved sharply and followed on the rest towards the Flood Armada. The huge amount of plasma engulfed most of the Flood fleet as as the white hot region of space cooled to red and then a dull orange glow, it became clear the Flood had been decimated.

All of a sudden a fleet wide communication came through, not from the Allied ships but from the Covenant flagship, Endless Devotion. The main view screen resolved from an image of the space above Earth to showing the interior of the bridge, similar in appearance to that of the Exultation but bigger. Sat on an anti-gravity throne with an elaborate headpiece was a Prophet. It was clearly younger than any Prophet humanity had come into contact with so John naturally was surprised by it's appearance. It wore the red robes and golden ornamentation of a Hierarchy, most likely a replacement for those lost during the Battle for the Ark. The creature raised up both hands in a grand gesture and began to speak. "True believers, Sangheili Separatists and Humanity. I am the Prophet of Redemption Hierarchy of the New Covenant and leader of this mighty fleet. We returned to the Ark after the Prophet of Truth was lost in the battle for control of the site. We searched tirelessly for a new purpose and after much time I began to fear hope was lost but fear not a Holy Oracle has been found and guided us on the path our gods once trod.", John muttered a curse under his breath, it looked like another hierarchy, full of himself and deluded that his 'gods' wanted humans dead, "This Oracle called itself Offensive Bias, it is the most holy of Oracles, the final one left behind by our Lords and guardian of all they left behind." John froze for moment, the Covenant had captured Offensive Bias? How had they got into the Shield World and past the Sentinels? His questions were answered for him by the young Prophet "It sought us out, appeared before my eyes in a column of light. We have a new purpose. Defend that which our gods themselves fought so hard to protect and destroy that which they sought to destroy. Warriors of the New Covenant, it is our sacred duty to defend to species we were lied to about. The human 'vermin'", the Prophet put heavy sarcastic emphasis on the word, "Are no such thing, they are the heirs to our gods, they are the Reclaimers. We must support them in their latest conflict, cast aside our foolish hatred of them, unite our Covenant in the war the gods guided us to fight. We must destroy the Flood."

John was speechless, the new Prophet was not what he was expecting, instead of continuing with previous practices enforced by Truth, Mercy and Regret. He had cast their teachings aside and recognised humanity as the heirs to the Forerunners and that they should help them, not destroy them. Maybe his name, Redemption, reflected his ideals. The video link pulsed and split into three and the faces of Lord Hood and Rtas 'Vadum appeared Rtas was the first to speak. "Prophet, what are these lies? The Covenant committed genocide against the humans, your own people instigated it!" The Sangheili sounded angry and he thumped his fist into the arm of his command chair with a thump.

"Fleetmaster", the Prophet began, "it is good to see you alive. I understand your doubts but as you can see, and I hope understand, the Covenant has changed. The races have more freedom now, Unggoy, Kig-Yar, Jiralhanae and San 'Shyuum all sit on the High Council. I came here initially to offer all our races the chance to join together, work together and live in peace now the Great War has ended but the Flood is more important than that. You must trust me Rtas, I only returned from my exile after Truth was dead. I was an exile because I knew the truth about why the war was fought and now I'm back to guide the Covenant into peace."

'Vadum still looked suspicious but nodded and sat back in his,

pondering. Hood seemed to have little to say, having never had anything to do with the Covenant's hierarchy seemed a little confused but anxious to gain at least a temporary ally to fight the Flood. "Prophet, you must understand that I do not trust you or the Covenant but I recognise that I need your help and clearly you suffered under the previous regime. We must all work together to destroy the Flood. Let us form this Alliance." Rtas, Hood and Redemption all nodded in unison and the link terminated.

John turned around to see that Kelly and Linda had both woken up as well and had seen all that had just happened, they looked furious. "The Elites were one thing, but now the rest of them?" Kelly fumed.

Linda looked at her and nodded subtly in agreement, John noticed this and knew he had to get them on side. He hated to admit it but they did need the support of the Covenant. "Look, we need them if we're going to beat the Flood. You think I trust them any more than you? Remember we felt exactly the same way when the Elites joined us but now we get on just fine, I'm sure the rest of the Covenant could turn out the same." The look on Linda and Kelly's faces told him his words had hit home, they remembered the day the Elites entered their Alliance and how well they now got on. They both muttered submissive words and turned to go and sulk in the corner, they hated being wrong.

John turned back to the view screen which had flicked back to show the two fleets. The now massive Allied fleet outnumbered the Flood ten to one and after several salvos of MAC rounds and plasma torpedoes the Flood was in full retreat, slipspace ruptures opening up and granting the fleeing ships an escape.

15. Chapter 14

****Into The Breach: October 26th 2552****

****Location: Onboard _Spirit of Justice_, Orbit Above Earth****

It felt good to be back onboard a UNSC ship, John thought as he, Linda, Kelly and Fred marched along the corridor to the bridge, the steady thump, thump, thump of their armored boots going in perfect synchronization as they went. After the Sangheili-Human-Covenant Alliance had been officially forged the UNSC had agreed to return the _Zealous Exultation_ to the Covenant as something to help the peace.

All the Spartans, Haverson and Cortana had been transferred back to the _Spirit of Justice_. Much to the displeasure of Sarah she was forced to share the ship's systems with Cortana, since she needed to be kept somewhere while not on a mission.

For several hours the massive fleet, now made up of a mixture of Covenant, ex-Covenant and human ships, had been coordinating into a formation in which to enter slipspace and jump to Sanghelios and liberate that planet from the Flood. From there the United Races, as the alliance was now being called, would sweep the Flood back until they could find the Gravemind and destroy it. After that they would keep pushing until they found the source of the Flood and eliminate that too, therefore destroying the parasite forever.

****Sleight Of Hand: October 29th 2552****

****Location: Onboard UNSC _Midnight Song_, Slipspace****

As Commander Steven O'Brien looked around the bridge of the ONI Prowler _Midnight Song_ he felt mixture of fear and contentment. Fear that his ship, a lone Prowler was being sent into one of the dangerous systems in known space. Relief that he knew he had the best Prowler crew in the business, they had all been carefully selected to crew the ship on this special mission, only the best of the best would do for the stakes on the mission were higher than ever. It was not just the survival of himself, his crew or humanity that was in the balance but all sentient life in the galaxy.

He had been sent in a specially fitted Prowler to the Urs system where he was to lay a massive minefield in space above the planet Sanghelios among any planetary defenses in preparation for the fleet which would follow them and arrive in approximately one day.

The ship shuddered and O'Brien was shaken from his train of thought, the main display showed a field of stars in the distance and before them, a three star system with five planets one of which had two moons and brown atmosphere. Thel 'Vadamee, the only Sangheili aboard, approached the Commander and pointed to the planet on the screen, "Sanghelios." he warbled in his deep voice, a sad look on his face as his head hung. The planet was a wreck, debris in orbit was slowly falling to the planet below although some orbital installations seemed intact despite being coated in Flood biomass. The planet below was in a dire state. Most of it was brown-greenish hue the areas separated by vast tracks of filthy, infected water. Some areas of the planet were blackened and still glowed a dull red, the Sangheili had tried to glass their own planet to destroy the infection.

The bridge was silent in memory of the billions who had suffered a fate worse than death during the Flood invasion. Steven was the first to break the stupor and silence as he began issuing commands. "Lieutenant Daws make sure our new cloaking shield is running smoothly, if we're spotted then we're as good as dead. Ensign Thomson get the mine laying system ready and the HORNET mines prepped I want this minefield set up asap."

After dealing out the other, more minor, commands he sat back and looked over at the Arbiter who was still silent, just staring at the planet. "Arbiter..." he began but when the elite looked his way he shut his mouth but then the alien spoke. "Sanghelios was our crown jewel, it was once a beautiful planet, not so different from your Earth, there were golden fields, mighty mountains, huge seas and the most beautiful cities in the empire. Now look at it." The pain in his voice was obvious but O'Brien needed to have one question answered, "What about defenses, surely the planet would have had a fleet but there's nothing, even the wreckage doesn't correspond with any of your ship designs." he asked quietly. "We once had a fleet of one thousand ships in orbit, I know not what became of it only that it is now gone." Silence reigned once again as the crew set about laying the mines near the orbital installations and then in a standard pattern around the rest of the planet.

After forty five minutes the job was almost complete and there was still no sign of any life anywhere in the system. "Daws, run life

scans on the planet, put the results up on the main display." There was a furious tapping of keys from the Lieutenant and the main screen resolved into a constantly updating image of the planet. It was smeared a bloody red, almost every in was covered, "Lieutenant, does red represent lifeless areas?" he gulped "N-n-no Sir" he stuttered back. As he switched back to the basic image and zoomed in the true situation became clear, the whole planet was coated in Flood. Not biomass, but actual living moving combat forms, carrier forms, tank forms, stalker forms and forms no eyes had seen since the Forerunner-Flood war. "Holy shit." O'Brien whispered, Daws fainted.

****Last Of The Brave: October 30th 2552****

****Location: Onboard _Spirit of Justice_, In Slipspace****

The space outside the _Spirit of Justice_'s bridge windows was pitch black and starless as it shot through the inky void of slipspace. The ship had been in slipspace for days after it, along with the rest of the fleet had jumped away from Earth to assault Sanghelios. No one knew what they would find there and the crew of the entire fleet was on edge. As Captain Price watched the void outside he was certain he saw shadows in the darkness, maybe such a large fleet jumping through slipspace in such a tight formation would make other ships slightly more visible. His train of thought was cut off as Cortana's avatar popped up on the holographic pedestal at his side, "Captain, eta for Sanghelios is one hour and counting." she said, as she spoke a small timer appeared in the corner of the view screen, counting down the time until their arrival. "Cortana, get the crew unfrozen and prepped for combat, I want everyone ready to go asap, and order the Master Chief to report to the bridge as soon as he's suited up." Cortana's hologram nodded and she disappeared back into the ships systems.

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The world resolved into a hazy blur as his eyes opened. John instantly regretted the motion as the freezing air stung at his eyes, forcing him to clench them shut again as the familiar whir as the cryopod lid swung up. Frozen mist poured out into the room as the only four occupied cryopods in the cryobay opened, releasing the Spartan team from their icy sleep.

There was an almost simultaneous set of thuds as the four clambered out from the pods and onto the deck. "Welcome back, Spartans." called a familiar voice as the four pulled themselves from the pods, getting a little unsteadily to their feet. Before them stood someone they never thought they'd see again. Doctor Catherine Halsey. "Ma'am!" John barked, as he snapped to attention, followed hesitantly by the other two. They were never quite sure how to act around the Doctor, she wasn't military personnel so she didn't have a rank, but she had always had authority over the Spartans. A salute didn't seem right but none of them knew what would be.

Halsey smiled warmly and waved down their hands, "I'm afraid there's no time for a catch up right now, I've got some new equipment for you and I need to give it to you before we get to Sanghelios." She turned towards the door and called back, "Report to the armory once you're dressed.", as she left the room.

"You heard her." John ordered Fred, Kelly and Linda, as he himself pulled on some underwear and got dressed.

Five minutes later the group had arrived at the armory and as they walked in a sight that would make any Spartan happy greeted their eyes. Lined up before them on mannequins were four suits of shiny new mjolnir armor, different to their old Mark V armor, it looked sleeker and more powerful. Halsey turned from her lab station at the other end of the room as she heard the door opening. "Hello again, this is the new Mjolnir Mark VI armor system. It's better than the Mark V in every way that counts. The shields are stronger, the recharge faster and the will grant you significantly greater strength than the current system. However, there are a few changes you'll need to get used to. The first is that this armor, thanks to some cooperation from our new allies has active camouflage, there are two settings, mobile, which means it's easier to spot you but it won't collapse when you move, and the static setting, which gives almost flawless camouflage as long as you don't move. The other big change is with the shields, you have the setting your all used to, full body protection, but there's a new setting, it's similar to the shields jackals have but it makes a bit of a humming noise and it's a lot stronger. As with all these options I expect you to be the judge of when will be most suitable to use each one."

This was followed by a lot of bustling as the Spartans were helped into their new armor by a number of techs. It was faster to assemble than the Mark V but it still took time and by the time they were all suited up and had had a chance to get used to the new controls fifteen minutes had passed.

Dr Halsey watched the whole time, a small smile on her face but she turned away as they finished and motioned to one of the techs who was fiddling with some weapons lying on one of the benches. "Steven, can you show the Spartans the new weapons." The small, frail looking man jumped a little and turned around with a start, "Me Doctor?" he asked timidly, "Yes, you're the one who made them, you present them." ordered the Doctor as she turned and headed back to her work bench.

The terrified man gulped and beckoned for the four Spartans to come over. "Okay", he began, "I've modified the standard weapons you would be issued to better suit anti-Flood combat. Firstly, the assault rifle now fire rounds which explode a little on impact, they don't travel quite as far as the normal round but they do a lot more damage to the target. Next is the shotgun", he said motioning to the weapon, "I've managed to produce some special plasma shells for it, effectively the thing fires off a very small plasma mortar which packs less punch than a Wraith, but it will spray out like a traditional shell. I've also got traditional shells and some incendiary shells which will torch anything they hit. There are some other projects I'm working on but those are the only complete ones I'm afraid, I'll let you know when I finish any others."

"Thanks." John, nodded as he hefted the assault rifle and turned to leave. Linda and Kelly and also grabbed the rifles but Fred had opted for the shotgun. "Will the Spartan team please report to the bridge immediately." the voice of Captain Price came in over the intercom. "Come on." John beckoned and they jogged from the armory and out into the corridor. As they stepped out the corridor was a battlefield of Marines and Naval personnel rushed to get ready for the upcoming

battle.

The Spartans doubled timed it to the bridge, cutting a swath through the crowds as anyone and everyone tried to get out of their way. As the corridor spewed them out onto the bridge an unusual sight greeted them. On the central holographic display was a pair of AI holograms. Sarah and Cortana. The two were obviously yelling at each other and appeared to be in a heated argument, at least John assumed they were since there was no sound coming as their mouths moved. "Welcome Spartans!" Price called as he saw the foursome entering, "Our AIs don't seem to be getting along so I muted them until they can sort it out. Anyway, we're about half an hour away from Sanghelios and I want you ready to drop asap. You'll be dropped in ODST pods as soon as we arrive, _Offensive Bias_ will meet you on the surface. Master Chief, you are to lead a strike team comprised of you and your Spartans, the Arbiter and an ODST squad. You'll be cutting your way through the Flood to try and gain access to the Gravemind. In the meantime the bulk of our forces will be providing a distraction in the form of a full on assault. _Offensive_ has created a toxin which he will inject into the Gravemind when you're close enough. Get to the drop bay, and good luck Spartans."

The squad saluted as one and just as Master Chief was about to leave Price called, "Master Chief! Take her with you!" The Captain sounded desperate as he motioned to the silently yelling form of Cortana, "Yes Sir." the Spartan said, trying to keep the laughter from his voice.

****Brace!: October 30th 2552****

****Location: Onboard UNSC _Midnight Song_, Orbit Above Sanghelios****

The ONI Prowler _Midnight Song_ had been sat in orbit above Sanghelios' biggest moon for three days, just watching as the surface of Sanghelios seemed to move with the sheer number of Flood forms. Several members of the bridge crew had been sent to the Medical for shock treatment and after a lot of deliberation it was decided that all they could do was send a warning to Earth and into slipspace to try and contact the inbound fleet. In the meantime they were forced to sit in orbit, waiting and watching and the planet below swarmed with the parasitic horde.

Slowly drifting in orbit, their engines only at half power was the remains of the Sanghelios Defense Fleet, now totally under Flood control, the ships would be the primary opposition to the fleet when it arrived, despite the massive size of it the Flood's parasitic nature would give them the chance to take many of the inbound ships and convert them to Flood control.

Several million kilometers off the _Song's_ bow, dozens of slipspace ruptures opened up into space, ejecting out dozens more Flood controlled ships. Many of them moved into an orbit above the planet but one, the biggest of the lot tore straight towards the planet, trailing bits of decayed ship and Flood biomass as it began a fiery but controlled descent through the atmosphere before coming to a crushing halt in the middle of a rocky mountain range.

The radio hissed out static for a moment before cutting off again. The crew shifted warily, concerned the radio burst could have somehow

given away their position. Several tense minutes passed and the atmosphere became less tense as there was no sign of immediate danger. Suddenly the ship shuddered with a massive impact, throwing the crew from their stations and into the floor in a heap.

O'Brien dragged himself up off the floor, clutching his wrist, from the odd direction it faced in he guessed it was dislocated. The pain racked over him as his body began to realise what had happened to it. The floor was littered with bodies, either unconscious or dead, he wasn't sure. Most of the view screens were dead and sparks tumbled from exposed wire and damaged consoles. The emergency lighting flickered, casting a bloody red flicker over the scene. The last working scene showed a medium sized Flood ship, dented from it's impact with the Prowler turning away, active camouflage stuttering on and off as it tried to recover from the impact. Limping over to his command chair O'Brien keyed the comm, any and all surviving personnel get to a life boat immediately, I repeat, get off this ship now, we're going down!"

He turned away and dragged himself to the other side of the bridge, prying open the First Aid compartment mounted on the wall, pulling out the most powerful painkiller in the pack, not saying much but he need to put off the pain in his wrist at least until he got off the ship. He gingerly took steps towards the exit from the bridge, hoping to get back into the main ship but the negative sound the door issued proved his fears. Between him and the rest of the crew was nothing but vacuum. He turned sadly, hoping he wasn't the only survivor as he headed for the emergency life pod, jutting out a little from the main bridge.

Stepping into the small pod he thanked whatever god watched over him that it was his left wrist he had broken and grabbed the M6C from the wall of the pod and with a heavy thump punched the release button. There was a hiss as the pod's air supply cut in and a sharp crack as the shaped charges blew the tiny pod away from the doomed craft, throwing him into a descent into the brown-green atmosphere.

Fire licked around the edges of the pod as it tumbled down through the atmosphere, the few onboard systems desperately trying to align the pod with a lake far below, trying to increase the chances of survival for the occupant. Steven O'Brien clung on for dear life with his one working hand as he looked out of the tiny window at his Prowler as it tumbled through the atmosphere, slowly disintegrating and burning up. He silently hoped no one was still onboard, worst of all on the bridge, knowing that the one missing body, his, had taken the pod.

As the tainted surface of Sanghelios rushed up to meet him he crossed the fingers he had that still worked and braced for impact. With an earth shattering crash and a loud splash the pod smashed through the surface of the lake and came to rest, bobbing on the surface. O'Brien, however, was totally unaware, gripped by unconsciousness.

16. Chapter 15

****Just One More Problem: October 30th 2552****

****Location: Onboard _Spirit of Justice_, In Slipspace****

The room feel eerily silent as the four Spartans entered, the five ODSs who had been lounging around talking went silent and looked up at them. One of the stood and offered his hand, a slightly cocky grin plastered on his face, "Gunnery Sergeant Eddie Buck, this is my squad, Romeo, Dutch, Mickey and that", he said, gesturing to a sleeping figure in the corner, "is the Rookie."

John nodded and pulled his helmet off, deciding it would be best to mirror the ODSs, "I'm Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, this is my team, Petty Officers Fred, Kelly and Linda." He replied, motioning to each Spartan in turn who each gave a polite nod. Buck nodded happily before continuing. "I know our two organizations have had their differences Chief, but I want to make it clear that my squad and I", he gestured to them again, "have nothing but respect for you. I fought at Harvest, Reach and New Mombasa. I know you and your kin have been fighting even longer than us so I can't know quite what it's like but what I've seen is bad enoughâ€¦" He trailed off a sad look on his face as the grin slowly left his face and he looked down. John reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, an unheard of gesture among Spartans, "It's good to have you on side." he said as he turned back to the other three. "Lets get ready." he said and marched off towards the pods and he set about locking his gear into place inside the tiny pod.

Five minutes later there alarms began ringing and the ship shuddered with the sudden deceleration of coming out of slipspace. Green lights winked on and off over the entrances to the drop pods and the ODSs casually strolled into the room and clambered into the pods. Once the last ODS was in the light went on to steady then flashed red and the pod hatches slowly swung round with a snap hiss as the pods pressurized.

From outside the pods there was the sounds of machinery whirring into life and the pods swung out under the ship, and then with a clack and a small bang the pods were thrown from the ship by a small explosive charge and began their fiery descent through the atmosphere.

Looking out if the pod's small windows John could see the shapes of swarms of dropships and their escorts tearing down towards the planet, heading off in a totally different direction to the Spartan and ODS teams. The main combat force was headed several hundred kilometers east of the drop zone the Spartans and ODSs had been given, they would land, set up a ground base and a military presence on the ground then prepare a diversionary attack whilst the Spartans and ODSs would get in behind the Flood lines and destroy the Gravemind, the theory was that without their central intelligence the Flood would become disorganized and therefore much easier for the combined forces to wipe out.

The comm hissed in John's pod and the small screen lit up as the static slowly resolved into an image of Lord Hood, "Spartan team, and ODS team Alpha you are henceforth being merged for the duration of this mission, Master Chief you're in charge, Gunnery Sergeant you'll be his two i/c. The Arbiter's ship lined up with the location you were dropped from and his pod is underway, he'll meet you on the surface, I'll contact you when you've hit dirt to update you on the situation in orbit. Good luck. The fate of all our species rest on your shoulders." the comm snapped off and the screen went dark. Outside the window the brownish clouds streaked past as the pod shot

through the sky.

The ground seemed to rush upwards faster and faster until, with a horrible crunch and shriek of twisted metal the pods slammed into the ground. As the black receded from his vision and the world came back he became aware of yelling, someone calling a name, he didn't recognise the voice or the name for a moment but then suddenly the world came back in startling detail and sound, it was Fred, yelling his name. He reached out putting all his force against the pod door until he heard a weak creaking and then a snap as the hatch gave way and soared through the air away from him. Pulling himself up and grabbing his weapon, checking it for damage as he did so, John stood and looked around.

His pod had landed in a low hollow in the ground, which was stained green and had Flood tissue growing over it. Fred turned around, startled by the thump as the hatch hit the ground. He turned around his helmet in hand, a huge crack across the visor. "Hey John! My helmets damaged and Kelly has the repair packs but she hit dirt a way away, I've got no chance of seeing with this thing!" he called, explaining his lack of a helmet.

Suddenly there was the sound of snapping twigs and a roar that couldn't have come from a human throat. Out of the brush crashed a massive Flood tank form, twice as big as the ones they had fought on Halo. Fred turned but was too slow to react as the creature swung it's massive arm, ending in a spike. There was a flash as his shields overloaded from the force of the blow followed by a tearing sound as the blade like appendage tore through his armor's underlay and through his abdomen. Reappearing on the other side, coated in bright red blood.

With a flick of it's arm the Flood form flung the wounded Spartan to the other side of the clearing and turned to John. The Spartan got down the one knee, shouldered his assault rifle and pulled the trigger. With more recoil than usual ten of the explosive rounds shot from the barrel and slammed into the 'face' of the Flood form, the wavy antennae exploded as the rounds hit and then the explosions continued back into the chest of the beast.

The force of the blast blew the monstrosity back into a nearby tree, where it collapsed in a heap, a gaping hole blasted all the way through it's body. John kept his rifle trained on the fallen alien as he cautiously approached it. He prodded it with his foot, comfortable the behemoth was indeed dead.

He lowered his rifle, his head buzzing with adrenaline. He was drawn back to the situation by a gasped wheeze from behind him, followed by a hacking cough. John whirled around to see Fred, lying on his back between two tree roots. More worrying than the damage to his armour or even the puddles of deep red blood pooling around him was the damage to his body. Through the point where the beast had struck John could see the sark bark of the tree.

Fred had literally had a hole punched through his gut. As Fred pulled his helmet off he began another coughing fit and thick, dark red congealed blood dripped from his pale lips. "John!" he moaned, as he tried, in vain, to stand.

Leaning over, John rested a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Fred, I'm sorry, I should have reacted faster." Even as he spoke he could see the blood pouring from the hole in his fellow Spartan's wound. "No John", Fred replied, "This isn't your fault, you couldn't have done a thing. Goodbye John." he whispered his voice trailing off as the light left his eyes and his head lulled back.

John's head drooped, another Spartan dead, right before his eyes and there wasn't a thing he could do. "Chief, I'm so sorry, but he was right." Cortana whispered. He ignored her, this was his fault. Then from deep down within him a rage swelled up, a rage aimed at the enemy who had taken his childhood friend from him. He turned to look at the fallen Flood form. He slowly walked towards it until he dived onto it and began smashing his fists again and again into the carcass. Sticky green blood coated his arms as his anger collapsed and he fell to one knee, feeling utterly defeated.

He heard a soft moan and looked behind him, to see Kelly and Linda crouched over the Fred's fallen form. John's eyes gained a steely glint as he stood and turned. "We need to move, the noise could attract more Flood. We need to meet up with the ODSs at the rendez-vous and continue with the objective. It's what he would have wanted." he added.

The two women looked up at him, their eyes wet with tears. They wiped them away, pulled on their helmets and straightened up. John walked over to Fred's body grabbing his dog tags then activated the countdown timer for Fred's armour power source to overload, destroying his body and any nearby Flood.

John turned away glancing at his friend's face one last time.

****The Objective: October 30th 2552****

****Location: Surface of Sanghelios****

As the Spartans approached the camp the ODSs had set up Buck looked up and immediately knew something was wrong. Their usually slick and professional movements seemed slower, as if underwater and their shoulders were slumped. Then it became obvious to him. There were only three Spartans.

Opening up a channel to his squad Buck reviewed the team list. Next to Spartan-104's name were three letters every soldier dreaded. MIA. "Guys, heads up, they've lost one of their team so be respectful." He pulled his helmet off and looked over at his team whose heads were dipped in respect to the fallen Spartan.

Then, from several hundred metres behind the Spartans there was a massive explosion, a plume of fire shot into the air and for the first time in his life, Buck saw a Spartan flinch. But he knew it wasn't from fear, it was the knowledge they had lost their comrade.

"I'm sorry Sir." Buck said as he cautiously approached the Master Chief. The Spartan looked at him and even through his visor could feel the pain in the soldiers eyes. "He fell in combat, it's what he would have wanted. Besides, we need to push onto the objective, any sign of _Bias_?"

A pulsing sound resonated from behind him and John turned to see the

AI hovering behind him. "A Reclaimer, you have arrived, excellent. Although I was told there would be more of you." Buck shot the AI a look and it backed off, figuring out what must have happened. "I am sorry Reclaimer, but if we kill the Gravemind then his death will not have been in vain.

"Alright, we'll spend the night here and move on tomorrow, it's already getting dark and I don't fancy trying to move around this forest in the dark. Linda, you and me are on watch. The rest of you, get some sleep." John issued the orders and turned away to go and sit on a tree stump, looking out into the darkening woods as the sun fell below the horizon.

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John was still awake, having not moved an inch, the next morning as the sun rose over the tainted horizon, casting a greenish glow over the world as it rose. Turning around and looking back into the camp he saw Linda, perched in a tall tree looking out over the forest for signs of movement.

As he turned and trudged back into the camp he clicked the comm to Linda and she too headed back towards the camp. The others awoke to the sound of the two Spartans' feet squelching on the Flood coated ground.

Kelly stretched and stood, ripping free from the Flood tissue that had begun to grow up around her as she had slept, wiping it off in disgust. Around her the ODSs experienced similar problems as they got up and looked around. _Offensive Bias _seemed to appear out of nowhere as John began issuing orders. "We need to get to just outside the Flood Citadel by the end of today, it's a long hike but if we can get into strike position then we can strike early tomorrow and have the Gravemind dead by sunset. Let's move out."

The group turned and headed off into the jungle.

The trek through the jungle was long and arduous, several times they were sunk so far into the Flood biomass they had to cut themselves free, vines and creepers blocked every path and the constant screaming of Flood forms in the distance kept them all on edge. John took point and after they had been going for ten kilometres he raised his fist, signaling the others to stop. Ahead of them, in a small clearing in the forest stood a roughly human sized Flood form, as the creature turned and sniffed John realised it had once been an elite and the reason it seemed so short was that it was sunk, knee deep into the soft ground.

After ordering the others to remain where they were he moved around the clearing until he faced the back of the trapped Flood form. He unsheathed his combat knife, clenching it in his fist he leapt forward bringing the blade down into the neck of the creature, it fell without a sound. Content it was dead John motioned for the others to follow.

Another four later they were once again interrupted, "Chief, I'm picking up enemy defenses on the top of the valley banks, we'll need to neutralize the enemy defenses if we're going to move through without being seen." Cortana warned through his headset

John swore quietly under his breath, "We'll split up, team one will be the ODS'Ts and team two will be the Spartans. We'll take the higher side, you take the other. Lets move out."

The two teams split and went their separate ways. As they walked John shut off his mic and spoke directly to Cortana, "What happened to the Arbiter, he was meant to meet us down here."

There was a momentary pause as the AI seemed to think about the question. "The Flood have set up some form of rudimentary radio system, one of the main radio masts for this area is on that higher hill. If we can get to it I can access their network and find out what happened to him." she explained. John sighed and fell silent, knowing that his friend was captured, possibly worse.

As they drew nearer they were forced to slow down and activate their active camouflage, carefully balancing the need to be slow and not become obvious and the need to be fast and get to their objective quickly.

Once they were on the outskirts of the Flood outpost the radio mast became clear, it was as simple as an abandoned Covenant relay embedded into the Flood tissue. What caught his attention was the fact that the Flood tissue around the relay seemed to be rippling with electricity, which arced across its surface. "Cortana, what is that?" he whispered, careful to be so quiet that not even the other Spartans could hear him. "I think it's some kind of simplified energy shield, it's designed to deflect the energy from any impacts, but if you touch it your shield should overload it."

Glancing around the small outpost John could see three repurposed Shade turrets, all pointing into the valley below, the Flood clearly didn't expect their enemies to have stealth capabilities. Suddenly from the other side of the valley came an almighty explosion as the smaller outpost on the other side of the valley was lit up with many explosions, ripping apart the Flood positions.

Almost instantly the Shade turrets opened fire, launching a barrage of plasma across the valley. Taking their chance John flashed his acknowledgment light green and from either side of him Kelly and Linda leapt forwards, rifles at the ready and took out the gunners.

At almost exactly the same moment John slapped his palm down onto the shielded tissue of the relay, the shield overloaded and his hand came to rest on the soft greeny brown tissue below. There were a few sparks as Cortana accessed the network then returned to his armor in just a moment.

"Chief, the Arbiter is being held in the Gravemind's citadel, we need to get there fast though, they could execute him at any time." Panic began to form in John's gut but he quickly pushed it aside, it wouldn't help him here.

"Acknowledged." he replied.

****Betrayal: October 30th 2552****

****Location: Orbit above Sanghelios, Onboard _Spirit of Justice_****

The Spirit of Justice shuddered as she loosed another MAC round into a nearby Flood ship and blew the stern off of the ship, engines and all, sending the wreckage hurtling down through the atmosphere leaving a smoking trail behind it.

Captain Price, sat in his command chair, silently thanked whatever god was watching him. The death of him and his crew had at least been momentarily delayed. After they had exited slipspace and dropped their ground teams off the Spirit had been locked in combat with the Flood fleet. No one knew where it had come from or where the ONI Prowler stationed in orbit had vanished to. However, as the Justice soared away from the planet, blasting her way through the masses of Flood ships to get back to the fleet, which was currently resting, a few hundred million kilometres away from Sanghelios.

As the ship drew outside of the minimum safe range dozens of new suns flared to life above the planet, right in the heart of the Flood fleet. The explosions, although weakened by the vacuum of space, tore through the Flood ships. Where once there had been over two hundred ships in orbit, only a little over three quarters of them remained. An even match for one hundred and seventy ships in the allied fleet.

The radio clicked, the signal for them to attack, and the fleet soared into motion. The Covenant fleet took up positions above the enemy fleet, raining down a hellish fury and the Flood decimating their numbers. Dozens more ships fell down into the atmosphere, littering the planet with wreckage from dozens of different ship types, from UNSC frigates to a single Covenant carrier.

As the Covenant moved down to join the UNSC and Elites in their closer range battles they seemed almost to his an invisible line. Around fifty Flood ships, previously cloaked, smashed into the Covenant ships. Their shields over loaded from the force of a flank speed impact, shattering their hulls.

By the time they had managed to get their weapons charged and destroy the remaining ships thirty of the one hundred Covenant ships of the line were gone.

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Lord Hood stood before the main windows of his flagship, the UNSC Say My Name. He had commandeered the ship from it's previous commander after the first battle of Earth, during which his own ship, the UNSC Io. While it was the same class as his old ship it was, as every ship was, different. It had it's own personality, and Hood was still learning it.

He was glad that no one would be able to see his face as the Flood ships wiped out the Covenant ships above them. The grin could have caused anger from some of the personnel who had genuinely agreed with the union between the UNSC, Covenant and Elites. He had never been keen on working the aliens who had so happily been slaughtering them. Unfortunately, up until a few moments ago they had outnumbered him, now the tables were turned.

He turned and marched towards his control chair. After sitting down he looked down at the key pad on the arm and typed in a code. **UNSC

General Fleet Command- Battle Plan X-Ray_Turn_The_Tables**. As he pressed enter the consoles all around the bridge went dark and shut down. Several ODSs charged into the room, assault rifle in hand and aimed at the startled bridge crew, some of whom tried to stand and turn but were thrust back into their chairs by the soldiers.

Hood stood and smiled, surveying the bridge crew. "You are all very lucky. You get a front row seat to a battle which will change the course of history, today the alien bastards who are so keen to make friends now that it suits them will learn what it means to mess with humanity." He laughed loudly as the ship began to move, lining up with one of the Covenant carriers, high above. The ship shuddered as the MAC fired, landing a heavy blow to the prow of the ship.

Almost instantly the comm came to life and the face of the young Prophet appeared on the holopad, his panicked. "Hood! Are you mad!" he cried. Hood rolled his eyes and looked down at the alien "Today is a great day _Noble Prophet_", he replied, putting sarcastic emphasis on the name, "I'm going to teach you a lesson not to mess with humanity, this is pay back for the war." He promptly closed the channel and walked back to the window, gazing out at the alien fleet as it desperately tried to juggle fighting the two enemy fleets at once.

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As the ship lined up with another Covenant ship Price turned to Sarah, his face horrified, "Sarah, what's going on, why am I locked out of my ship?" The AI, too, looked worried,

"I'm not sure Sir, we received a command from the UNSC_ Say My Name_, the computer identified it as an ordered then locked the systems down and linked the back to the _Say My Name_ from where there are firing orders coming from an unknown AI out to the rest of the fleet. Basically, we're all locked out and on autopilot to destroy all Covenant ships."

"Sarah, do you mean to say Lord Hood has turned on our allies?" Price asked, his voice disbelieving. "Yes." Sarah replied, her head hung low, "Just before the link was severed I received a message, Hood thinks that we can destroy all the aliens then defeat the Flood with just the human fleet."

Price cursed, "Sarah, get me a Pelican and a few Marines ready, I'm going over to the _Say My Name_ to have a word with the management."

17. Chapter 16

Help!: October 30th 2552

Location: Surface of Sanghelios, Unknown Location

Steven O'Brien shook his head as he climbed out of unconsciousness and back into the horrors of the world he was stuck in. As he dragged himself along the length of the escape pod, now horizontal, he heard a splashing sound.

He looked up, outside the pod he could see sand and water, or at

least, what had once been water. It was now stained a hideous brown. Then, he suddenly realised where he was, the Flood infested surface of Sanghelios. All around him he could hear the bellows and roars that couldn't come from any human throat.

He grabbed the M6C from the floor as well as two clips for, which lay, discarded, from where they had fallen in the impact. He checked his pistol was loaded and thumbed off the safety, he carefully got to his feet when suddenly he grunted in pain and collapsed. Then he remembered, his hand. It had gone blue and all feeling was gone from it, he couldn't even twitch his fingers. Once more he got very carefully to his feet and, hold the pistol at the ready, he limped out into the ruined world. All around him lay bits of wreckage, presumably from the Midnight Song. As he looked up into the sky he could make out the shapes of Flood ships, gliding overhead. Suddenly, there was an almighty flash and he was bathed in harsh white light. The HORNET mines. The UNSC must have arrived, maybe he had a chance of being saved, although, who would be looking for a single survivor from a missing ship on the surface of a Flood infested planet.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, he turned and found himself face to face with a Flood combat form. Up close they looked worse than ever. The now infected human had rotting skin, he could see the teeth inside through holes in the cheeks, they were sharp and faced at odd angles, cutting into the cheek every time the jaw moved. The once neat black hair was now matted and grey, already falling out. The eyes were blood shot, so red they looked like there was no white left and the iris was totally gone. All that was left of the pupil was a tiny black dot in the middle of all the red.

By far and away the worst thing was the smell. It smelt like it looked, a month old rotting corpse that spewed out poisonous odors as it breathed. He felt physically sick as he stared at the monstrosity, suddenly he understood why the Flood was so bad.

Several other Flood forms surrounded him as he took a step back, one grabbed his hand in a vice like grip and began to drag him along. It's head turned, staring around at it's fellow Flood. Then it did something unexpected. Through the shambles of it's mouth, it spoke "We shall take this to the Mind, it may know of our enemies' plans." Almost without question the others turned and began walking off, heading in a deliberate direction, as one.

****Rescue Mission: October 31st 2552****

****Location: Surface of Sanghelios, Outside the Gravemind's Citadel****

The sun slowly fell down below the spires of the massive Flood citadel. When they had arrived John suddenly realised that what had appeared to be a single structure was in fact the hulls of dozens of different ships, all welded together and dumped on the surface of Sanghelios. It reminded him of High Charity, although not as large.

As he sat watch, he looked out at the structure as the sun set behind it, silhouetting it against the red sky. It was an even more impressive sight than the mountains in which they had finally found the Citadel. There was a long and dangerous day ahead of them so John

had agreed, after much persuading, that they would take it in turns to stand watch so that John would at least get some sleep.

As he stood there, in the slowly failing light, he thought back over the mission so far, Fred's death and the Arbiter being captured. He wondered if anything else could go wrong.

From behind him he heard a faint humming sound and he pulled his pistol and spun around, to find himself pointing the gun right at the eye of _Offensive Bias_. The Monitor seemed to produce a slight grinding noise, or perhaps a growl, as it moved out of the line of his pistol.

Holstering the weapon John looked back to the Monitor, "How did you get here, I didn't see you with us all day."

"Reclaimer, this planet was controlled by my creators many years ago, just as they did on the Halo Installations they installed a teleportation grid, I can travel to key locations around the planet at will, although, unlike on Halo the system is limited. I can only transport my self and I cannot choose to go anywhere, there are preset locations I can get to. I simply chose the nearest one to here and after I arrived here spent time assessing the structure before us." the AI explained, it's voice calm, as though it too was soothed by the surprisingly beautiful view before them view before them.

"_Bias_, what will happen when we get to the Gravemind? I was told you had a virus built into you but wasn't told it worked or how we give it to the Gravemind." John asked, finally voicing the question which had been bothering him since before they dropped onto the surface. "It was a poison developed by my makers, when we arrive at the Gravemind's lair you must give me physical contact with the central part of the Gravemind, I can then release the virus and finally complete my purpose." his voice trailed off sadly and then John suddenly realised. _Offensive Bias_ would die after injecting the Gravemind with the virus.

"I'm sorry _Bias_." John said sadly, and he meant it.

"Do not worry Reclaimer, I have existed for over one hundred thousand years, we must all die some day." the AI replied, his reply sounded like what it was, a mask for his internal pain at knowing he would die, "Go Reclaimer, I shall take watch, you must sleep, there is a hard day ahead of us all."

John simply nodded, unable to argue all of a sudden, and went back to sleep with the others.

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As the sun rose over shape of the Gravemind's fortress the Spartans and ODSs were already up and ready to begin their attack. They had congregated at the bottom of one of the tallest walls and had their grappling hooks latched over the top of the wall.

As the climbed up there was almost no noise, save for the screeching of Flood in the distance, John couldn't help but wonder where the defenders for the Citadel were, but he quickly pushed the thought away, the must have been preoccupied with the main battle going on

far west of the Citadel.

By the time the group had neared the top the sun was showing over the tips of the highest mountains, "Chief I'm detecting movement!" Cortana cried, but it was too late. John felt a tug from above and as he looked up he caught the end of a massive green arm disappearing over the top of the wall, with his ascent line in hand. He was yanked up with surprising force and flew up over the top of the wall and came to a crushing stop as he impacted on the walkway at the top of the wall. There were several other thumps as the other landed around him.

He glanced up and saw what it was that had grabbed him, a massive Flood tank form staring down at him, several others already moving to grab the rest of his team. In a daze he felt himself yanked to his feet and flung over the back of the beast and was carried back into the heart of the base.

****Spartans?: November 1st 2552****

****Location: Surface of Sanghelios, Outside the Gravemind's Citadel****

O'Brien suddenly found himself jostled awake as he fell to the ground. He yelled in pain as he landed on his ruined arm, the Flood form looking down at him gave him a disdainful look and motioned for him to stand. He gingerly got to his feet before cradling his injured arm.

There was a grunt from the Flood form and it motioned to another form to come over. Even as it walked across towards him there was a cracking of bones and a blade like appendage sprouted from its wrist. With its free hand it gripped O'Brien's wounded arm and brought down the blade with an almost graceful swish. Then it was over. The hand fell to the ground with a thump, followed by a shower of blood as his heart began pumping its blood into open air. Wrapping its hand around the stump of his wrist, the Flood form applied a little pressure and a small mound of Flood tissue grew across the wound and stopped the bleeding.

O'Brien, however, was hardly aware of this as he fell into shock at the sudden and unceremonious loss of his hand. "Walk. Now" the creature's voice sounded distant as he began to move forward, his feet felt heavy and his ears rung, though surprisingly he felt no pain from his arm.

Then, as if from nowhere, he felt a warm sensation flooding up his wounded arm and all over his body, the Flood tissue must have released some sort of pain killer, he realised. Now more focused and able to walk without falling he looked around, the Flood fortress was massive, it was dozens of bits of ship, both UNSC, Covenant and some other design, all meshed into one giant mess. Very similar to the massive ship which had crashed from orbit, he thought.

As they neared a massive sphincter like space in the wall which slid open with a sickly squelch as they approached. Inside the massive catacomb like structure was coated in Flood tissue, it hung from the beams almost down to the ground. As they entered the sounds of thousands of Flood forms shifting at the light as the door opened.

The soft sound of the Flood footsteps on the floor as they marched into the large passageway was muffled even further by the sheer volume of Flood biomass.

It was a long walk into the depths of the structure, it steadily got darker as they got deeper but the Flood seemed to have an almost telepathic ability to avoid all obstacles, O'Brien, on the other hand, was not so lucky. He had tripped so many times he had lost count and every time he did he received a sharp kick from the combat form behind him.

After what seemed like hours of this maltreatment they finally emerged into a dimly lit chamber, in the centre of which, on a throne that almost seemed to be alive, sat the most hideous creature he had ever seen.

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Several hours later, the creature, which had heard referred to as the Gravemind by some of the Flood, had tortured him. One of its many tentacles had somehow connected itself to the cap the combat form had put over his missing hand, the following pain had been the most agonizing of his life so far. Worse, even, than the pain of his shattered hand before it had been cut off.

"_Why do you resist!_" bellowed the Gravemind as O'Brien's body was once more racked with agony and he was forced to his knees. "What makes you think someone like me would even know how our attack works?" he groaned through the pain, determined not to break. "_You DO know, I can see it in your mind and show you shall tell all!_" _roared the enraged creature before unleashing another vicious wave of pain onto his body.

Suddenly there was a cry from the other side of the room, "Gravemind, the enemy has been captured trying to gain access to your Citadel. We captured them, for you, your majesty." The Flood form performed a somewhat awkward bow as it spoke, "Interesting", thought O'Brien to himself, "this must be the Flood central intelligence."

The sound of heavy thuds could be heard from the other side of the room behind the Gravemind as it swung its body around on the tentacles which took the place of its legs and held it upright on the floor.

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John was filled with a sense of dread as he was dragged along the dark corridor towards the Gravemind's lair. He couldn't help but wonder where _Offensive Bias_ had disappeared to but he was suddenly and brutally dragged from his thoughts as he was roughly thrown to the ground at the edge of a huge cavern.

In the centre of the room sat what could only be the Gravemind. Its legs were a series of tentacles which were embedded into the Flood tissue covering the floor. Its skin was a darker shade of the usual Flood colour and had the same appearance as the tentacles which sprouted from the back of the creature. The actual body looked somewhat frail and thin, and as it turned John saw that, unlike every other Flood form he had come across, the Gravemind had a face of

sorts.

It was almost identical in shape to the head of a Prophet but it had pure red eyes and looked far more malevolent. The tentacles that connected it to the floor twisted and it turned to look at him. From the muffled groan John suddenly saw what the Gravemind had been doing. Connected to the end of one tentacle was a human, his face pale and tired looking and his left hand missing but he was alive and appeared uninfected.

Then it clicked. This was the Commander of the missing ONI Prowler which was meant to be in orbit. Something must have gone wrong and they ended up on the surface of Sanghelios. "_Child of my enemy, why have you come?" _roared the Gravemind across the room as it spotted the humans. "To finish the fight I started on the Ark." John replied simply, his voice perfectly calm. "We're gonna kick your ass, you ugly freak!" yelled Romeo at the Gravemind.

With a sudden darting motion the Gravemind turned to look at the ODST, tentacles lifting him up by his torso and dangling him before the face of the Gravemind. The tentacle slipped up further and removed the ODST's helmet with a thud as it hit the floor. Drawing the struggling Romeo closer to its face the Gravemind chuckled, "_Such a strong will, and yet so wasted."_ then there Romeo began to change. His skin went pale and then greenish brown, his eyes went red and he began to writhe as his body mutated. The Gravemind was turning him into a combat form. "NO!" yelled Buck, despite knowing that his friend and squad mate was already lost.

The Gravemind dropped the now near rabid ODST, he twitched on the ground for a few moments before standing and then stumbled off into the darkness. All seven of them couldn't help but gulp at the terrible scene they had just witnessed. "_Now, you will show me what you hides! Or I shall feast upon your BONES!"_ roared the furious Flood intelligence. "We won't tell you anything you freak!" called back Buck, although with less ferocity than Romeo had mustered, for obvious reasons. "_Then you shall be taken and kept elsewhere, while your friends die in what is obviously a diversionary attack."_ The Gravemind pulled back from how it had been leaning forward and gave an ominous chuckle.

With a snap of its tentaclelike fingers several tank forms appeared and dragged the unfortunate humans away, into the depths of the Citadel.

****Dedication: November 1st 2552****

****Location: Orbit Above Sanghelios, Pelican En Route To The UNSC _Say My Name_****

The Pelican shuddered as Price struggled to strap himself into the jump seat in the side of the Pelican. All around him sat ODSTs, some of the finest from onboard the _Spirit of Fire_. They all looked calm in their body armour, Price, however, couldn't say the same. He was sweating in his Officers uniform in the hot confines of the Pelican troop bay.

"Captain, we're coming up on the _Say My Name_, beginning docking procedures and preparing to cycle through the airlock. Several tense minutes followed as the Pelican entered the ship, Price was unsure of

the reception they would receive so he had the ODS'Ts position themselves in an inverse arrowhead formation so they all had clear lines of fire out of the Pelican, should it be necessary.

As the dropship touched down on the deck with a clunk a wave of tension spread though the assembled soldiers. As the hatch slid down the all aimed their weapons out, to see a terrified looking Ensign stood outside. "Sir, Lord Hood ordered me to escort you to the bridge." the Ensign's voice trembled as he saluted the Captain. Price straightened up and returned the salute. "Lead the way Ensign." ordered Price.

The massive destroyer shook as it fired another MAC blast, presumably at a Covenant ship. Price began to think about how to approach Hood on the topic of his betrayal, if he just jumped in and attacked him he could very easily lose, it depended on whether Hood had armed support on the bridge, but if he carefully broached the subject the crazed Admiral could easily just ignore him.

As the bridge doors eased open with a hiss Price was met with the sight of fifteen bridge officers tied up and under guard by a group of ODS'Ts, and Hood, stood by the bridge window, looking out over the wreckage of dozens of shattered alien ships. "Lord Hood!" he called to the man beside the window. The Admiral turned around, his face wet with tears of joy, "Price! Welcome aboard old friend, here to get a better view of our greatest victory?"

"Yes Sir.", Price replied, "Mind if I join you?"

"Certainly, certainly, come over here my friend." Hood gestured for Price to stand beside him and, carefully not to trip on the tied up crew, all of whom gave him pleading looks, did so.

The view was spectacular and terrible at the same time, purple ship carcasses almost filled the view screen as the UNSC fleet fired volley after volley of MAC slugs at the alien vessels. From the fact that the UNSC ships all faced the same direction and fired at the same time Price was sure that they were all being controlled from one location, likely the command console onboard the Say My Name. "Admiral?" asked Price his voice perfectly level. Hood turned towards the Captain and found himself staring down the barrel of a pistol.

"Captain Price, if you do not lower your weapon then it is a breach of UNSC protocol and you will be court marshaled." ordered Hood, his voice calm and his face deathly serious. "No Admiral, I will not. You made a deal with the Covenant and the Elites, now you have betrayed them for your own gain." Price snarled back at the Admiral who didn't even flinch as Price pushed the pistol further into his forehead.

"Captain Price, can you not see the opportunity for humanity here? We're carrying out God's will Captain, it's our fate to rule this Galaxy." Hood snapped back, and Price's eyes widened.

"Our fate? Surely you don't believe in that Manifest Destiny type crap sir?" Price protested, and instead of being shouted at, as he had expected, Hood merely smiled and nodded.

"I do. God gave us the power to get through the war, and now he wants

us to finish the job, undo the mistake he made." the man lectured, a crazed look in his eye. The common Christian belief these days was that the Covenant and all non-humans were earlier creations of the Lord; mistakes if you will. In other words, bollocks. We will destroy them and put humanity back in their rightful place among the stars."

Suddenly, Price realised, Hood was mad. The look in his eyes made that much clear. As Price dug the pistol further into the mad Admiral's forehead he suddenly seemed to become aware of what Price was doing.

"Captain...what are you doing?" Hood questioned nervously, his voice breaking a little. Price took a deep breath.

"Stopping a madman. Command the fleet to stop firing. Now." the Captain ordered, thrusting his own radio at the Fleet Admiral. Price didn't want Hood's hand going anywhere near his belt. Hood glared at him, before gingerly accepting the radio. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, where the gun was pointed.

"You'll regret this." Hood threatened, before bringing the radio to his mouth. "Cease fire! Wait for further orders."

Price was breathing heavily, but his hand kept steady somehow. He felt a slight warm sensation on his back, and realised dozens of laser sights were being aimed at him, the ODSTs Hood had with him on the bridge but he wasn't distracted, not even for a second.

The ship stopped firing and outside the window Price could see the UNSC fleet sat, motionless in orbit. His glance out of the window was his first mistake. Hood lashed out with his fist catching Price across the jaw and sending him flying. Instantly the ODSTs were upon him and his forehead was a mass of red laser dots.

He dropped the pistol and raised his hands, this was a fight he couldn't win. At the moment. "Sanchez! Niles! Tie up this treacherous piece of scum." the UNSC leader ordered, and two corrupt marines grabbed Price by the arms, sneers on their faces. They bound his hand and legs behind his back with rope, and threw him on the floor. Price struggled, and couldn't get up. From his position Price could see Hood stroll back over to his command chair and tapped a button. The ship instantly opened fire again and the wanton destruction of the Covenant fleet continued.

"You'll never get away with this Hood, if the Covenant regroup and focus on this ship, you're screwed." yelled Price.

"Not a chance", chuckled Hood, "they destroy this ship and there's no way to abort the command." he laughed gleefully again and turned back to watch the battle, as the Covenant tried to fight off the Flood while slowly being hit down by the human fleet.

"It is my dedication to humanity that we stand above all these lesser beings. First I will let you watch humanity's triumph, and you shall die knowing you are a traitor."

****Escape: November 1st 2552****

****Location: Depths of The Flood Citadel****

"After they they took me here and the Gravemind interrogated me hours." finished O'Brien, concluding the story of what had happened since his ship had arrived in system. "Now, we need to find a way out of hereâ€¦" he said, his voice trailing off as he looked around for any way of escaping. The Arbiter stood up from where he had been sat in the corner, "An incredible story, you are lucky to have survived, but I feel I must part with my own. After I was dropped from my ship in one of our equivalents to your SOEIVs I made landfall in the heart of the jungle. Things went badly and my pod had the misfortune of striking a rock, sending me unconscious for I don't know how long. When I awoke the Flood already had me captured and tied up in plasma manacles."

His head hung in shame as he spoke of his defeat, John put a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder, "Arbiter, it does not matter, it wouldn't have changed anything if you were with us, we were all captured, it is what we do now that really matters."

John turned to O'Brien, his voice becoming ever more serious "Sir, with respect, we are here on a high priority mission and we need to get it done. The orders came directly from Lord Hood, I'm in charge and we need to get back to the Gravemind. I can't give you details, the Gravemind might hear us but you need to trust me." John explained. O'Brien's head hung in disappointment at the news that if he tried to escape, he'd be alone. "Alright Master Chief, you're in charge, what's the plan?" asked O'Brien. "We wait." replied the Spartan.

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After hours of simply waiting in the cell, standing around and catching up on sleep John heard a familiar noise in the distance. "Everyone, get ready!" John called back to the others, and they stirred, hurrying to get themselves ready. The dark room was filled with a blood red glow as the frame of _Offensive Bias_ appeared in the darkness. "Reclaimer, we don't have long, the Gravemind has learnt of your plan to kill him but he does not yet know how, we must hurry. They are preparing his ship for departure even as we speak." The ancient AI's eye glowed a brighter red and unleashed a searing red beam which slice through the bars to the cell.

Grabbing them with both hands John pulled. Hard. There was a tearing of Flood biomass and the door came away in his hands. He unslung his rifle and ran after _Offensive Bias_, the others right on his heels all the way.

The tunnels twisted and turned, up and down, left and right. "_Bias_" John called, "You better know which way you're going!"

"Of course Reclaimer." the AI replied, his voice icy at the suggestion that he might not know where he was going. The continued on in this fashion for longer than John could count. Suddenly the walls began to shake and ripples appeared in the puddles of liquid on the floor. "We must hurry Reclaimers! That is the ship's engines beginning their warming cycle, the Gravemind will escape if we don't get to the ship in time."

As they shot around the next bend at breakneck pace the tight passage opened up into a massive cavern. In the centre of the room sat an enormous ship, miles long, the aesthetics a combination of Human, Covenant and Forerunner designs, a mismatched and deformed creation, just like the being that had created it.

Below the massive ship John could just about make out the hideous form of the Gravemind worming it's way into the ship as the engines visibly heated up. Between them and the ship, however, were hundreds of Flood. "Spartan, we must run, as many of us must get to that ship as possible."

The strike team stepped into the room, and instantly a loud roar reverberated through the gigantic chamber like sound of howling wind surging through the mouth of a cave.

"Stop them!" the Gravemind roared, the voice clearly originating from within the ship. It was about half a mile away, down a large stretch of land covered by Flood. The legions surged forward, screaming in a feral manner.

"Chief," Linda stated, drawing out her sniper rifle. "You go ahead and get to that ship sir, we'll cover you for as long as we can."

"I won't leave you here," John protested vehemently.

"You must John, it's been an honour serving with you Sir." She saluted, turned and ran off to some sort of mast structure in the corner of gigantic room.

"I can't leave you. I'm the CO. It should be me who-" John called after her, but was suddenly cut off by the thunderous noise of huge engines firing up. The Gravemind's ship was firing up.

"We'll come with you Spartan." The Arbiter said, gesturing to the ODSTs who nodded back.

"They're right, Chief," Cortana told him. "You've got to go. At the very least, to secure an area for everyone to regroup in. Now move it, Spartan!"

Stealing one last guilty look at the rest of the resolute and determined strike team, John grabbed _Offensive Bias_' chassis and ran towards the Gravemind's ship, accompanied by covering fire.

Flood lunged for him, but he dodged with an athletic grace, firing as he did so. He let rounds loose from his rifle, felling a few of the Flood who drew a little too close. Instinctively, he swung out with his left hand as something brushed against it, receiving a complaint from _Offensive Bias_, who was effectively turned into a makeshift weapon.

Finally, he slid under the open legs of one of the Flood, rolling on the ground near the ship and drawing out his rifle, the ammunition for which he had been saving. He put the heavy stock in his hands, lined up, and opened fire, the explosive bullets impacted into the waves of Flood, keeping them at bay. Then he waited for a few minutes, looking up nervously at the imposing ship.

Suddenly, Buck, Dutch, the Rookie and Kelly broke through the ranks, gasping and letting rounds fly from his own weapons. John waited, but no more appeared.

"Where are the others?" John roared over the cry of the engine.

"The Flood got them. They're dead." John's heart plummeted.

"Linda too?" _The Arbiter's dead?_ he added silently.

"Not yet. The Flood cornered her, but she managed to escape by climbing up a crumbled tower. She can't escape, but she's giving us covering fire. I tried to help her, but there were too many. We've got to leave!" Kelly shouted back, motioning up at the ship, which was beginning to fire up its thrusters. The Spartan threw Buck, Dutch and the Rookie up onto the ramp of the elongated and triangular ship, and Kelly managed to grab hold of the rim, pulling himself up. John turned back to the screaming hordes of Flood, suddenly, Flood form after Flood form was flung into the air and the Arbiter smashed into the clear area below the ship, his armour green with viscous Flood blood.

"Arbiter" he cried, joy in his voice, "Where's Linda?" The Elite looked back to the mast Linda had climbed, his face sad. "No!" John yelled and made to head back, but Kelly grabbed his arm "Dammit John, she's already dead! We've got to go now; it's what Linda would have wanted!" Kelly screamed back, pointing up at the ship, which was beginning to lift off the ground.

"Listen to him Chief!" Buck shouted down at them, leaning over the edge of the ship's rim.

"Go, Chief. The Gravemind has to be stopped", Cortana told him quietly. "I'm sorry."

John turned, his head hung low and leapt up towards the ramp into the ship, his hand made contact with Buck's hand and the ODST groaned "Dammit Chief, I can't hold you for long! Climb up!" the Gunnery Sergeant growled at him between cries of pain. John dug his hand deep into the metal hull of the ship, creating a handhold to pull himself up with. He made a herculean effort, and managed to get a secure footing on the ship, which was now beginning to rise.

Looking back out into the huge room John released _Offensive Bias_ who was still in his clenched hand and looked out to where Linda was, the mast was covered in Flood.

****Surgeon: October 30th 2552****

****Location: The UNSC _Point Of No Return, _Location Unknown****

Less than six months ago, he'd been given a momentous task. He'd been asked to piece together every piece of information he could about the legend, the hero of the UNSC who had died in mysterious circumstances; Admiral Preston J. Cole.

What the Surgeon had found had upset him. He'd long considered Cole, as did many, as a hero. In many respects he was; in the course of his career he put down many insurgent uprisings, and destroyed

approximately 300 Covenant ships in battle. He was a ruthless, suicidal bastard, but he got the job done.

And then, he'd vanished. Destroyed a Covenant fleet by turning a planet into a Brown Dwarf, and had supposedly died.

That wasn't the case.

Cole had abandoned humanity. There was no other way of putting it. He'd ran off to some distant farming world with the woman he'd married, a woman who'd turned out to be an Insurrectionist Colonel. She'd vanished from his life, only to re-enter it during his final hour, rescuing him from the jaws of death.

And Cole had let her whisk him away. Didn't try to contact the UNSC he'd worked for all his life. He just let humanity die. With Cole dead, the Covenant had been emboldened, and soon wiped out most of the Outer Colonies.

He was a coward.

Still, that didn't change the fact that humanity needed him now. More than ever. Less than an hour ago the Surgeon had received a message via slipspace. Lord Hood had gone rogue and was being taken care of by some Captain but the UNSC would need a new Admiral.

The message was clear, and to the point. "If you have Cole, then we need him right now. If not, then return to [LOCATION REDACTED] to discuss final measures that can be taken in the event of a loss."

Luckily, after around a month of hunting, the Surgeon had found Cole. He was living under an alias, secluded and living on a farm with his Innies wife.

He'd always wanted to retire to a farm in the outer colonies. Hopefully, the farmer hadn't erased the battle hardened warrior Cole had once been.

****One Last Betrayal: November 1st 2552****

****Location: The UNSC _Say My Name_, Orbit Above Sanghelios****

"Pleases, Admiral, see sense." pleaded Price from his place on the ground but the crazed Admiral simply laughed in response, Hood turned and looked down at the tied up Captain. "Don't you approve? Have you really forgotten who you are? Captain John Price, you served for twenty five years during the Covenant War and saw billions murdered by those alien bastards." Hood gestured to the now severely diminished alien fleet. "I like you John, and there's still a chance for you if you agree you are wrong and come over to the side you are meant to be on."

Price's eyes glazed over as he thought about the Admiral's words. "You're right Sir" his voice trailed off and his eyes developed a steely resolve. Hood turned fully around, looking genuinely surprised, "Really, and how can I trust you on that?" he asked, suspicious.

"After what you said, the billions murdered, the friends and family I lost on Reach, why do they deserve to live while so many of us died? You're right, Sir, they all need to die to put us back in our rightful place." Price replied.

Hood stepped down from the viewing platform and strolled over until he stood beside Price, "Very well Captain, you may stand beside me as humanity finally triumphs, don't be offended though if I have my guards permanently watching you, experience is, I find, the best teacher." Hood leant down, releasing Price from the tight knots which had held his hands together.

Price stood up, brushing the dust from his uniform. Instantly one of the ODS'Ts came up behind him, rifle pointed at his head. The threesome walked back over to the viewing window and Hood pointed to one of the few super carriers left in the Covenant fleet, "You see that, John, that is the ship with that feeble Prophet onboard, I set up with targeting so that it the last one to be destroyed, that way the bastard will know how we felt before he dies."

The two stood in silence as they watched the battle playing out before them. After five minutes of watching Price turned to the ODS'T behind him, "Corporal, what is that hostage doing free?" the soldier spun around, to see no hostage free. As he whirled back around Price's fist impacted the side of his head and sent him tumbling to the floor. As the man fell, dropping his weapon, Price grabbed it and spun around sending three shots searing into Hood's chest.

The Admiral fell back, almost in slow motion and landed against the window, smearing it with bright red blood. He slid slowly to the floor, blood dripping from his mouth. John Price, however, was unaware of this as he too hit the floor, a bullet hole in his back.

The sound of gunfire filled the room as Price's ODS'Ts leapt into action and opened fire on their treacherous counterparts. Price looked up and saw the face of the ODS'T medic in front of him and he was silently grateful he had insisted a medic be brought. "This may hurt Captain." said the medic as he shoved the tip of a biofoam canister into the wound, filling it with the expanding, pain killing polymer.

Price wheezed as the hole in his lung was filled and he groggily got to his feet and looked down at Hood. His once white Admiral's uniform was soaked in blood and it dribbled down his chin, "How could you Captain? Betray your own species." Hood groaned as his head fell back. At last the insane Admiral was dead.

Limping over to the command console Price freed the ships to recommence fire on the Flood fleet, the comm hissed and the face of Rtas appeared on the display, "Thank the gods, Captain Price, we shall sweep back the Flood with what remains of our fleet, you humans must consolidate your position before the battle continues in earnest.

****Surgeon: October 30th 2552****

****Location: The UNSC _Point Of No Return, _Location Unknown****

SURGEON opened the wooden gate leading up to the small house in the centre of the Cole farm. A Border Collie, tethered up, began barking at him.

Slowly, with both excitement and doubt, the Surgeon moved to the front door, which was wooden. Wooden doors proved just how out of touch from the rest of the Galaxy this small colony was. It only had a population of a few thousand. No wonder the Covenant had decided to just leave it alone.

Taking in a deep breath, and straightening his tie, dusting down his black as midnight suit, the Surgeon raised one trembling hand and knocked three times on the door.

Lights came on upstairs, and inside the Surgeon could hear a few other dogs barking. There were footsteps inside the house, followed by a harsh scolding of the noisy mutts. The Surgeon had heard that reprimanding voice dozens of times when researching Cole. He had the right place!

"I told you last week, I'm not interested in your god damn retirement home!" an old, gnarled voice called from the other side of the door, before promptly wheezing.

The Surgeon found he couldn't speak. His mouth had dried up, and no sounds would escape his throat. Nervously, he coughed, and replied.

"I'm not here about that sir. Can you open the door please?"

There was grumbling from the man on the inside, but soon enough the Surgeon heard the sound of locks being unlocked and bolts being removed. The door opened.

What the Surgeon saw was quite shocking. The man standing before him was Cole, no doubt about that. Surgeon had seen his face far too many times to have any doubts about that.

However, Cole didn't look anything like he once had. He was dressed in a dressing gown, maroon, which looked as if it hadn't been cleaned for months. His hair had begun to fall out, his eyes sunken into their sockets. In his hand was a half empty bottle of red wine, so early in the morning too. He wore a wedding ring on his right hand, which implied that the Surgeon was right, and that he had been reunited with his Insurrectionist wife. His beard, which had once been mostly black tinged with grey, was now mostly grey tinged with white. Obviously, Cole didn't take very good care of himself. Then again, he looked to be quite physically fit for his age.

"What do you want?" Preston Cole demanded suspiciously. Then a look of cunning crept into his eyes. "Wait, no, I can guess. You're dressed smartly, so you're not another farmer looking to lean on me for the winter. However, from the look of you it's clear that you don't live on this planet, you're obviously a city guy. You look to be in your forties, maybe in your fifties, and you have an air of confidence about you. That implies that whatever the organisation you work for is, you rank high in it. Not from the retirement home, as we already cleared up. Damn bastards there piss me off. You don't seem to be a debt collector, you're not intimidating enough."

Cole paused for breath, putting his hands behind his back as he peered at the Surgeon.

"No, I reckon you're a government worker of some kind. Police? I doubt it, the investigators here dress casually so they don't look imposing. You could be a court official, but your suit is too dark for that. It's likely you're military, since I can see an official looking stamp on the papers hanging out of your coat pocket. Definitely not directly associated with the UNSC, I can tell if a man is a soldier or swabbie. Intelligence, probably. Not one of the lower, private firms. No, you have the look of an Office of Naval Intelligence man about you. Section I is unlikely. Section II don't do this sort of thing. That leaves Section III as a possibility, but then the files would be available for the UNSC to view openly by an officer with enough clearance. ONI probably doesn't want people to know I'm still alive yet. It could cause dissent. And so, the only logical explanation is that you're Section Zero, which means that you don't officially exist. You probably have a codename of some sort."

The Surgeon was at a loss for words. He knew that Cole was intelligent, but hadn't prepared himself for just how preceptive his was. Cole was nearly as good as him. Nearly.

"That's incredible sir, but I would have told you anyway."

Cole's eyebrows rose.

"Really? That's an uncommon trait in a Spook. It's all irrelevant anyway, I'm not interested in whatever you might offer. I'm done with your world."

Before the Surgeon could get another word in, the door was slammed in his face.

"Admiral Cole!" Surgeon shouted, banging a heavy fist on the door. "Admiral Cole!"

Suddenly, the door swung open again, and the Surgeon found himself staring down at the barrel of an eight-gauge shotgun. His breath caught in his throat.

"Don't ever call me that. I'm not an Admiral. Leave, there's no-one for you here," the grizzled old man holding the weapon growled at him. The Surgeon held his hands out soothingly.

"Please sir, let me explain the situation to you first. I wouldn't have come unless it was urgent," the ONI Investigator informed Cole, who frowned in puzzlement.

"Urgent? The Covenant's beaten. Are you telling me the UNSC can't deal with a few disgruntled aliens? That's a situation that doesn't require force, it requires diplomacy," the ex-Admiral replied, and the Surgeon realised just how out of touch he was.

"When was the last time you got news on this colony Cole?"

There was silence as the old war hero mulled the query over, scratching his scraggly beard in thought.

"About three months ago, when the last shipment of feed came in. Why?"

The Surgeon groaned, before proceeding to tell Cole about everything that had happened recently. How the Elites had begun to attack humanity again, how they'd both been on even playing fields. Then about the return of the Master Chief and the other Spartans and how the Covenant and Elites were now on their side. The Surgeon relayed how the Flood had infected Sangheili, and how the planet had been a battleground ever since. And how, right now, the UNSC needed Admiral Cole's expertise. He then filled in many questions that the Admiral had, including "What the hell are the Flood?"

Admiral Cole stood in the doorway of his house, shotgun hanging loosely by his side and jaw agape. He then nodded, throwing the gun to the ground.

"I see. And what makes you think I'll help, Surgeon? I abandoned humanity when they needed me most. Aren't you even curious as to why?" Cole demanded, dragging the ONI officer inside his house and shutting the door behind him. The farmhouse was a bit of a wreck. The place stunk of alcohol and cigarette smoke. The floor and walls were dirty, and the Surgeon could see a chicken roaming around the living room, pecking at crumbs on the carpet.

"I have theories sir, but I would like to know something. Millions - billions of people died because you disappeared Cole. How does that make you feel?"

Cole leaned against the staircase banister, the old, rotting wood creaking under his weight. He lit a cigarette with a shaking hand, closing his eyes.

"Terrible. I know I'm a coward, you don't need to tell me that. But in all honesty Surgeon, I was afraid. The Covenant were gaining on us, and eventually I wouldn't have had any ships left to go on my suicide runs. I was a broken man. Suffering from depression. I didn't tell anyone about it, but it was true. If I'd carried on the way I had been, I would have ended it all eventually. Then what would the galaxy have been left with? Not with the image of a legend going out with a bang, taking an Armada with him, but with the sad depiction of the only man willing to directly fight the Covenant, beaten and broken. I'm not making excuses, but I had reasons spook."

"You're forgiven Cole. Totally and utterly. You can atone for what you did in the past; become a Hero once again. If the UNSC knows Admiral Cole is fighting with them, then hell, we might stand a chance against the Flood after all. The Covenant and Elites fear you too, they'd be more inclined to listen to humanity with you on our side. Please; I'm begging you. Help us in our darkest hour," the Surgeon pleaded desperately.

There was silence for a few moments, in which Cole buried his face in his hands, breathing deeply. Finally, he looked back up at the Surgeon with moist eyes.

"I need to think this through. Go wait in the living room, please. I could be a while."

The living legend then turned away, tightening his grubby dressing

gown a little bit, his slippers flopping pathetically as Cole trudged up the stairs, stooping and mumbling to himself.

Can this beaten shell of a man actually do anything to help us? The Surgeon wondered to himself, shaking his head doubtfully. Still, he complied with Cole's wishes, and went to sit in the living room, lifting a disgruntled chicken off a chair so he could ease into it.

Surgeon heard footsteps descending down the stairs, and rose out of his chair with both excitement and dread. Cole had obviously finished mulling his plea over. What would his reply be?

The man who walked into the living room, straight backed and confident nearly made Surgeon's jaw drop.

Was that really the man who had just minutes before stood pathetically in his bathrobe and slippers, with a beard and smell that looked like they hadn't be attended to in weeks?

Admiral Cole was dressed in finely pressed Admiralty uniform, an impossibly long row of medals pinned along his chest. His belt buckle shined, every button on his shirt gleamed. The grey uniform he wore seemed like new, and fit around his figure as if he had been born wearing it. Affixed to his short, trimmed grey hair was a cap, which hadn't lost its shape at all. Even his boots had been polished.

His previously long and shaggy beard had been trimmed to a short stubble, neat and tidy. His eyes were no longer sunken and depressed, but were instead sharp and possessed an air of command about them. His previously long, dirty fingernails had been rounded down to small, neat tips.

"Admiral Cole sir!" the ONI Investigator had a sudden urge to salute, and quickly snapped to attention, looking with awe at the man before him who looked every part the legend. The Flood were doomed.

"At ease." Even Cole's voice now had a commanding tone to it. "I've decided to accept your offer Surgeon. When do we leave for Sangheilios?"

"Immediately sir! I brought with me one of the fastest slipspace traversing vessels available. If we leave now, we should arrive at the planet in under two hours," Surgeon replied, still unable to take his eyes off Cole, who nodded curtly.

"Then lead on Surgeon. We've got a war to win."

19. Chapter 18

****Surgeon: November 1st 2552****

****Location: The UNSC _Say My Name_, _Orbit Above Sanghelios****

The Pelican from the ONI ship _Point Of No Return_ cycled in through the airlock and landed with a clunk on the hard deck plates. As the ramp folded down Price caught glimpse of the Admiral and snapped to rigid attention, trying not to flinch due to his injured body.

Admiral Preston J. Cole marched down the ramp and returned the salute, "Greetings Captain, take me to the bridge and fill me in on the details as we walk." They turned and began to walk away as the Surgeon started up the Pelican's engines and flew the dropship back through the airlock, into the Point Of No Return and then jumped out of the system.

When they eventually arrived on the bridge Cole was fully updated on the situation and walked up to the command chair with the confidence of man who could not or would not be beaten, even by the Flood. As he sat down he turned to Price, "Captain would you please return to your vessel, your crew needs you."

Price gave a crisp salute, "It was an honour to meet you sir." He turned on his heel and marched back to the hangar where he boarded the Pelican and returned to the Spirit of Justice.

Cole looked around at the bridge crew with interest, they all looked professional, hard working and not overly awed at their new CO. "Set what remains of our fleet to slingshot around the planet, when we get to the other side we'll fire off a MAC salvo and then join up with our alien buddies for the ensuing fist fight. Any questions?" There were none. The ship shuddered as it accelerated and was instantly followed by every ship in the human fleet.

As they passed around the planet, picking up considerable speed Cole suddenly regretted leaving the UNSC all those years before, he had missed being in command, leading the charge into battle and inspiring awe in his foes.

This fleet streaked around the dark side of the planet and as they emerged the Flood fleet was exactly where he wanted it, "Link the fleet MAC control to my console." he ordered. A small timer appeared in the corner of the display, twenty seconds and counting. He was focused so much on the Flood fleet he almost didn't spot the behemoth of a ship tearing up through the atmosphere on a collision course with his ship. "Fire the emergency thrusters, hard to port!" he shouted sternly at the nav officer. There was a large explosion from one side of the ship and everyone, with the exception of Cole himself, was thrown to the ground. There was a horrible scraping sound and the scream of tearing metal and the Flood ship was past them.

It had left it's mark though. A huge gash had been taken out of the side of the destroyer and due to atmospheric leaks and the impact of the massive vessel the ship was now spinning around erratically.

"Fire stabilizing thrusters" ordered Cole.

"Aye Sir." called the nav officer, and the ship slowly span slower until she came to a stop.

"Fire up the engines and bring us to seventy five percent, I want us back with the rest of the fleet and ready to make our MAC strike asap." ordered Cole. His order was followed by a chorus of "Aye Sir"s and the ship accelerated off towards the already dispersing Flood fleet, many of the ships had already been damaged or destroyed and many looked as though the only thing holding them together was the

Flood biomass they were coated in.

The ship shook violently and unleashed a MAC slug, the ultra dense tungsten shell smashed into the largest remaining Flood ship and shattered the prow of the vessel, sending it careening off course and into several smaller ships. The _Say My Name_ was already caught up with the UNSC fleet and combined with the remains of the Covenant and Elite fleets, they numbered seventy five ships to the Flood's seventy four. It would be a difficult fight.

****Central Intelligence: November 1st 2552****

****Location: The Gravemind's Ship_, _Vector away from Sanghelios****

As the seven of them sprinted along the long and battle damaged purple corridor Cortana began to speak to him, "Chief, I've managed to hack into the ship's network and get hold of a schematic of this ship, it's a mess of bits of ship held together with a lot of welding and carefully regulated gravity generators which help it stay in one piece. I'll overlay directions onto your HUD so you know how to get to the Gravemind first." she explained.

"I understand." he replied, his voice sounded tired, he had lost two Spartans in one mission and he didn't want to lose any more, but the fighting ahead would be intense and who knew what would happen and who would survive. As he began walking there was the sound of scaring metal and pinging rivets and the part of the ship he had been just metres from entering fell away, revealing the prow of a UNSC destroyer which was spinning erratically in the other direction. There was a gale force wind as the ship began losing atmosphere before the shield changed it's form and covered over the gap, a Covenant blast door sealing the space outside.

Looking behind him John saw five people lying, scattered in a daze on the floor. Five people and _Offensive Bias_, five people where a moment before there had been six. John hurriedly brought up the team bios and saw that one of the ODS'Ts, Dutch's, heart rate had spiked. The ODS'T must have not had a good grip on anything when the hull breached and had been launched out into the space above Sanghelios, he just hoped the man would be picked up by a UNSC craft.

As the others got unsteadily to their feet John suddenly realised their route to the bridge was now missing. "Cortana, I need an alternate route to the bridge." John ordered. From behind him he heard a yell of surprise, it was Mickey, they had just realised their friend and squad mate was gone. "It not fair!" yelled Mickey, punching the wall, and then grabbing his fist, a pained look on his face. "Mickey, we don't have time to grieve, we can honour him when the mission's done, besides, we don't know he's dead, he's probably just gonna be picked up while he's in orbit. We'll see him when we get back." Buck did his best to console the ODS'T and after a moment it seemed to work, Mickey sniffed once and nodded then grabbed his rifle off his back and turned to John, "Chief, what's the plan?" he asked.

"You'll need to turn around and head further back towards the engines and then do a u-turn and head up the centre of the ship to get to the bridge, it's the only way now that that section of ship has fallen away." John sighed and nodded then motioned for the ODS'Ts to follow him as he set off into the ship.

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He could tell they were nearing the bridge, the Flood resistance had been increasing steadily but the combined fury of John and Kelly, both of whom had lost their friends to the Flood and the ODSTs who had lost Dutch, in part because of the Flood. They were scything through the dozens of Flood forms which were desperately trying to get between them and their master.

John unslung Fred's old shotgun and brought the massive barrel to bear on a tank form which was determined to turn the Spartan advance into paste. He pulled the trigger and the gun almost knocked him into Buck from the recoil, out of the barrel flew a shower of superheated plasma, burning through flesh and armour and bone. The Flood all around the unfortunate tank form burst into flames from the blast and the tank form itself was blown in half. John had to admit, the rather weedy scientist knew how to make a powerful weapon. As John clipped the shotgun to his back again and drew his rifle the Arbiter leapt over the dismembered tank form, dual energy swords in hand.

He spun gracefully in the air, the plasma blades slicing through the Flood. As a tank form lumbered towards him the Arbiter took full advantage of his momentum and the slimy floor and went onto the ground, sliding right between the massive alien's legs, swiftly leapt up again and brought his swords across chopping the behemoth neatly in half. As a ranged form hung from the roof opened fire on him he brought both swords up, poisonous spikes sizzling as they hit the burning plasma. He drew back one arm and threw the blade, it spun three times before striking the Flood form, dropping it from its position on the ceiling into a heap on the Flood.

Reaching down calmly and drawing out the blade from the dead Flood he deactivated his weapons and, all opposition in the corridor eliminated, turned to the stunned humans behind him. "Come humans, we must hurry before the Gravemind leaves the system!" he called, brought out of their stupor they all hurried on, _Offensive Bias_ silently hovering along behind them as they neared the Gravemind's final lair.

****End Game: November 1st 2552****

****Location: The Gravemind's Ship_, _Vector away from Sanghelios****

With a crunch John's fist impacted the skull of the last Flood form guarding the entrance to the bridge. He turned and motioned for _Offensive Bias_ to come forward, "Bias, what's the plan once we're in there?" he asked.

"I must make contact with the Gravemind's central core and in doing so inject my poison, ending his life and my own." he explained his voice, slightly sad but full of determination. "Wait? What?", John asked, "You never said anything about you dying!"

"No Reclaimer, I did not, I knew how you would react but you must understand, I have lived, if that can be said about an artificial intelligence, for over one hundred thousand years, I was created with the sole purpose of stopping the Flood. It is my programming, my duty, as you should understand John." The AI explained. John was

stunned, no one other than his Spartans or Doctor Halsey had ever used his first name, it felt odd, although it shouldn't.

He nodded sadly, knowing full well what it meant to have a duty to perform. As one they walked forwards and the doors to the bridge slid open. In the centre of the room, atop a large and tall pedestal sat the Gravemind himself, staring down at them with suppressed malice. His thick tentacle like limbs swayed hypnotically in the air, casting complicated and intricate shadows on the wall. Dead flesh collected between his decaying jaws, the inside of his mouth lined with the crushed skulls of hundreds of different creatures. The Gravemind bathed in a pool of bone and flesh, and the tormented screams of those unfortunate enough to be melded into it could clearly be heard, turning John's legs to jelly. And yet he also possessed a calming serenity about it, an imposing god-like presence.

He was both monstrous and magnificent at the same time.

"_So, you have finally reached me_," he rumbled with the voice of a thousand hellish beasts and heavenly angels. "_I believe congratulations are in order. John, Kelly, Buck, Mickey, Thel andâ€¦ the Rookieâ€¦_" the creature face contorted in concern that it had no name for the ODST but quickly smoothed back to its horrible glare, "_Yes, I know you. Better than you know yourselves_."

"Then you must know that we're about to put an end to your miserable existence," John answered sharply, stepping forward. Every step was a battle as he strove to confront this awesome creation. The Gravemind laughed, his dead form convulsing and rippling as he shifted.

Suddenly, he lashed out with his tendrils and grasped the ODSTs and the Arbiter in a bone crushing grip, before slamming them into the ground. They slumped, unconscious.

"_I could quite easily do the same to you, John. But I won't. Let us talk awhile, child of my enemy_."

John narrowed his eyes at the great creature before him, before sheathing his weapon and nodding. What other choice did he have?

"If you want," he told it, still keeping a firm grasp on _Offensive Bias_, calculating how best he could reach the Gravemind. All he needed to do was plunge the Forerunner AI into it, and the virus would be unleashed.

"_You think my existence miserable, do you? Look at me, John. I do not age, I possess more knowledge than any other being in this petulant universe. My might is matched by none, and I command a species far greater than your own_."

"But are you happy?" John demanded softly, and that question caught the Gravemind by surprise. "You are hated by everything. Your own kind only serve you out of fear. From the moment of your creation to now, nothing has ever loved you, or even liked you."

"_I care not for those petty mortal emotions!_" the Gravemind roared with the grainy voice of a thousand dead. "_The universe treated me with contempt from the moment your ancestors came into contact with me, and I see no reason to treat it any differently_."

"My ancestors?" John questioned, utterly perplexed. The Gravemind scrutinized him closely as if he were searching his soul, and then drew back with a sly grin.

"_You don't know? Did you not tell the humans of their legacy, Offensive?_"

"It would have served no purpose," the Forerunner AI spoke back stiffly, as if ashamed. The Gravemind laughed capriciously, tendrils making ever more complex and ornate movements.

"_Then I shall enlighten them myself. You see, John 117, the race that I destroyed is not extinct. The species lives on, and five survivors are in this room before me at this very moment in time. You are Forerunner, John. Every 'human' is a descendant of the some of the Forerunners that fled to their hidden colony world Earth as I crushed their mighty empire. Over time they lost their technology, and recessed into what is now known as humanity. I searched for you for years, but to no avail. Earth was a closely guarded secret it seems, and the galaxy is wide, and vast. Eventually I concluded that you were no threat, and gave up. Then suddenly like a bad omen you come to me. You may have changed the name of your species, but you are still the same. Persevering, adaptive, survivalists. I am your destroyer, enemy of mine. All the destruction you see is a result of your pathetic race's attempt to beat me into submission_."

"Is this true?" the Master Chief demanded of _Offensive Bias_, his voice unwavering, a stoic and emotionless being on the exterior.

The AI seemed to hesitate.

"Yes, John. It is true. Humanity are the last remnants of the Forerunners. Your people were destroyed by the Gravemind," Mendicant Bias told him gravely. John struggled with the ramifications of this. The acts had been wrought millions of years ago, but the effects were still present even now. And although it was completely ludicrous, John felt guilty. He turned to the Gravemind, who was staring at them with glee.

"_So what happens now, John? Would you kill the next step of evolution, one that your own people created? What right do you have to undo the acts of the past? Your time has long since passed; the universe belongs to us now_."

John stared at the majestic being before him, and considered his options. Was the Gravemind truly such a bad thing? Did it take life, or give it? It was creating a unified universe; there would be no more sadness, no more hate, no more anger, no more envy.

"Don't listen to it John, it's playing with your emotions", Cortana cautioned him, but her voice was soon drowned out by the Gravemind's.

Slowly John approached the creature, the tentacles swaying out of the way as he approached, "Gravemind, you are right, we shall fight together work together." he said. Suddenly he leapt forward, bringing _Offensive Bias_ into his hands and plunged the AI deep into the chest of the revolting creature, bones cracked and splintered as he plunged the AI deeper into the creature, even as it roared and

thrashed tentacles smashing into the walls as it tried to fight off the virus within itself.

Then, like a switch had been flicked, it became motionless, tentacles hung in mid air until suddenly they collapsed to the ground with a dozen heavy thuds. Then, eyes wide open, the Gravemind began screaming, billions of voices, the voices of every Flood form there was and everything the Flood had ever killed all screaming and crying and wailing through the mouth of the dying Gravemind. The tentacles crashed, thumping with heavy thuds into the ground, splashing water and blood everywhere. Then the body went limp, and it was over.

****Powered Down: November 2nd 2552****

****Location: UNSC _Say My Name, _Orbit Above Sanghelios****

"Target that ship." Cole ordered, pointing to a specific Flood cruiser, "Order the _Spirit of Justice_ to adjust heading to match ours, we'll take out that big one in low orbit together."

In the distance the massive hulk of the _Spirit of Justice_ shifted, matching the course of the much smaller destroyer, both bearing down on large Flood vessel. "Fire!" Cole boomed and the ship reverberated and two MAC slugs shot forth from the destroyer and three from the _Justice_ smashed into the Flood ship, sending it careening down through the atmosphere, leaving flaming trails behind it.

Suddenly, the lights on every ship in the Flood fleet flickered and went out, shutting them down, dead in space. "Admiral, I'm reading no energy signatures from any Flood ships save the large one on a vector in system, but she's sending us confirmation that the Master Chief and his squad completed their mission, the Gravemind is dead and that ship is under our control." reported the comms officer.

Cole cracked a rare smile and back to laugh, not a humorous one but a cruel one. "Order the fleet to arm the archer pods, I want every single Flood ship destroyed."

"Aye Sir."

Almost as one the UNSC fleet formed up and sweeping over the motionless Flood fleet, decimating it and sending every ship hurtling through the atmosphere.

"Send a message to the Master Chief, I want him back on board the _Spirit of Fire_ asap, we're going home, advise Fleet Master 'Vadumee to glass this planet, it may have been their home world once but the Flood put paid to that." Cole ordered.

****Homeward Bound: November 1st 2552****

****Location: The Gravemind's Ship_, _Vector away from Sanghelios****

There was a groan of pain and John turned around, Buck had pulled his helmet off, conscious once again, a thin trickle of blood ran down his skin. "Chief?", he asked weakly, "Is it over? Did we win?"

John looked over and realised what had happened, in it's thrashing

the Gravemind had smashed Buck in the chest cracking ribs and sentencing the ODST to a premature death. Buck had been fighting since the start of the Human- Covenant War and had survived intact, but the Flood had been too much. John walked sadly over and took the dying man's hand in his own, "Yes Eddie, it's over." The light left the ODST's eyes and his body went limp. John felt a profound respect for the man, as much as he had felt for any of his friends, what he had heard was true. If Buck had been any better, he would have been a Spartan.

"John, I need you to put me into the ship's control systems so I can stop this tub and get us headed back for Sanghelios, this fight isn't over yet." Cortana instructed sadly into his ear. He leant over to the command console and she transferred into the system, the ship slowed down instantly and gravity shifted slightly as it turned back towards the planet it had been fleeing.

"John!" he recognised the voice instantly, it was Kelly. He turned around and, out of the blue she leapt forward and hugged him. "At last it's over the war is over, the Flood is over, peace at last." she hugged him tight and showed no signs of letting go.

"Spartan", the Arbiter called, "You have indeed proven yourself a mighty warrior, greater than any Sangheili in history." He knelt down on one knee, "I am but your humble servant in comparison."

"Please, Arbiter, I couldn't have done any of it without help, you, Kelly, Mickey, Fred, Linda, Buck, _Offensive Bias_" His voice trailed off as he looked over at the frame of the deceased AI, firmly embedded in the Gravemind's chest. He walked over and, with not insignificant effort, yanked the frame out with a shower of greenish brown gore.

"Chief, we've got orders from Admiral Cole to return to the _Spirit of Justice_ and we'll be departing for Earth as soon as we're aboard." Cortana called from the console.

"Cole?" John asked, and Cortana shot him an 'I'll explain later' look so he turned back to the others, "Kelly, you grab Mickey, Arbiter, Buck, we're not leaving him here." John ordered, he picked up _Offensive Bias_ heavy frame and prepared to lug it the long walk to the nearest hangar where a Pelican awaited them.

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As the Pelican's engines roared and it lifted off the deck it shot forward and out into open space, back towards the _Justice_, and home, John looked out of the back window at the Gravemind's ship, he would save the news that humans were descended from the Forerunner for when they returned to Earth, for now he wanted mull over what had happened.

He had lost so much in this mission despite the fact he had helped save billions of lives, and not just humanity but all the alien species as well, but even then he couldn't help but wonder, could they all live in peace?

****Memorial: November 11th 2552****

****Location: Earth****

The graves stretched out for miles.

Bang!

The first gun shot of the rifle salute caused John to flinch, as he stood amongst the hundreds of thousands watching the sombre funeral procession. The dead outnumbered the living.

Fred and Linda aren't buried here. Their bodies were long lost on Sanghelios, John thought, the realization cutting into him like a keen knife.

The sobs of grieving relatives and friends of the dead rang out, carried by the wind. John found that he could shed no tears. The devastation was too much for him to handle. Countless men and women had died, human and otherwise.

If I'd been faster getting to the Gravemind, most of these people would still be alive.

Shaking, John slowly began to sink to his knees, and the hot steaming tears finally began to roll down his scarred, unnaturally pale face.

Bang!

He felt a hand brush against his shoulder, and tighten its grip as if to console. He looked up and saw the solemn face of the Arbiter looking down at him.

"Be strong, Spartan," was all Thel said, and it worked. John nodded, swallowing with a dry throat, and stood up, watching the scene before him once again.

Bang!

The 3-volley rifle salute ended, and Cole moved between the graves, taking long, confident strides despite the sadness of the occasion.

"We have all lost many we hold dear," the Fleet Admiral began, voice strong and confident. Not too long ago it would have been shaky and quavering. "And their sacrifices will not be forgotten. Their heroic efforts allowed us to emerge from this conflict victorious. And look at how strong we are for it! No longer do we all quarrel amongst each other. Humanity, the Sangheili, the Jiralhanae, the San 'Shyuum, the Unggoy, the Kig-Yar, the Lekgolo, the Yanme'e, and the Huragok; all of us united and coexisting in harmony, as an Alliance of races. We will rebuild, and colonise throughout the galaxy, and beyond! And woe betide anyone who dares to attack us as we do so."

Cheering would have been inappropriate, but John could tell that the small speech had lifted the spirits of everyone attending the gargantuan funeral. He was surprised that Cole had managed to pronounce the true names of all the non-humans perfectly.

With a deafening thud, the innumerable caskets - some containing bodies, others merely as symbols - were lowered into the infinitesimal graves, and a depressing mood swept across the

conglomeration once again. Priests and Deacons began to file through the graves, praying for the religious dead. It would be hours, probably even days before they finished, the dead were almost innumerable.

"Let's go," John said to the Arbiter as a chill swept over him. The Sangheili nodded, turning around to leave, and the Spartan couldn't help notice the sadness in his eyes, his mate and children had been on the planet.

They'd all lost something on Sangheilios.

****Eplilogue: November 5th 2552****

****Location: Surface of Sanghelios****

"Even as she dies, Sangheilios remains graceful," Thel Vadam', Arbiter of the Sangheili observed as he watched the beams of concentrated plasma in the distance cascade across the surface of his home. It felt as if the glassing beams were smashing into his heart.

The two Sangheili were walking across the planet of Sangheilios, and more specifically were climbing Vadam mountain. In childhood, the two had always intended to do it together, but R'tas had been drafted into the military before they had the chance.

This was their final opportunity, and they had seized it. The glassing beams were being fired away from their position, and Vadam was to be their final destination, long after Thel and R'tas left.

"That she does, my brother. Never did I think this day would come. It is--"

"Horrible," Thel finished his friend R'tas' sentence, putting a hand on the slightly smaller Sangheili's shoulder

Finally, after nearly an hour of effort and turmoil, the two friends reached the summit; so high that it had not been tainted by the Flood. R'tas stared happily at the pure Sangheilios grass covering the top of the mountain, the light blue blades swaying softly in the cool breeze. Patches of snow dotted the wide summit, caught in the trees and on the sharp crags. The Arbiter sat next to him, as weary as he was.

The glassing beams were more visible than ever, and R'tas knew that they did not have long before the atmosphere would begin to boil away. A Phantom remained alert below them, ready to pick them up at a moment's notice.

The city of Vadam dominated the scene, a smoking, blazing wreck of a ruin. The walls separating the large hub from the outlying land and all its houses and small towns were crumbled, some scattered across the Flood tainted plains. Buildings were collapsed and ablaze, and the streets were piled high with the corpses of the Flood. They would rot on the streets, and deserved no more.

"Do you think Earth will serve us well as our new home?" R'tas asked the Sangheili who was his friend, brother in-arms and advisor. Thel

considered his words for a few moments, absently ripping tufts of the tough Sanghelian grass from the ground. Perhaps some of the seeds could be preserved, and sewn elsewhere.

"It is but temporary, my brother. We shall find a new world to call our own soon," the Arbiter finally replied, setting himself to the task of collecting the seeds of the blue blades of grass.

"But when, Arbiter? The colonies are as ruined as Sangheilios is, and every human world we encountered was razed to the ground. Even if we find a suitable planet, the technology needed to terraform it sufficiently was lost with the downfall of the Covenant and Sangheilios. Perhaps in time we shall find a new home, but it will be many years."

"Our primary focus should be pro-creation," Thel answered, coughing awkwardly as he broached the uncomfortable subject. "The Sangheili have been devastated by the Great Schism and now this. But a few hundred thousand of us remain. The humans may even outnumber us now."

"Then we need to keep our vigil against those who could cause us harm," R'tas told him, face grim. "It will not be long before the Unggoy replenish their numbers; they breed like rodents."

"You fear another rebellion?"

"I predict it. Much of our might has been lost, and the Unggoy have always wanted independence. Now would be a good time for them to strike."

"Then perhaps we should simply grant them independence," Thel voiced the radical thought he'd been entertaining out loud. R'tas started.

"What?"

"The Kig-Yar and the Mglekgolo and all the rest, too. We are not the Covenant, my brother. They are all people too; they do not deserve to be kept in what is effectively glorified slavery."

"Arbiter, what you suggest is--"

"The best solution," Thel interrupted. "We grant them their independence, assist them in setting up their own governing bodies, and allocate them some of the land the humans will give us."

"An admirable plan, Arbiter, but the Brutes and Prophets will never agree to it."

"The Prophet of Redemption is a good and wise person. He will see the merits in this decision, and will convince the others. We can hammer out all the details when we arrive at Earth. No doubt a treaty shall be formed."

"Don't remind me," R'tas groaned. "The chances are that it will take weeks, or maybe even months to create such a treaty. I am not looking forward to being buried in political talk. It is a shame that most of the Council is dead."

"Fear not, for we shall form a new one. With time, R'tas, the Sangheili will rebuild, and we shan't be alone. Together with the humans and those that we grant independence, we shall all create a unified conglomeration which will stand the test of time, and any who seek to destroy it."

"By your word, Arbiter... the glassing beams draw closer. It is time we leave, I think."

Thel sighed, standing up slowly, and looked out for one last time at a Sanghelian sunset. The pseudo-indigo star of Helios drifted beyond the horizon, the sky a myriad of purples, blues and oranges.

"Very well," he said, activating the communicator on his neck. "We are ready to leave, pilot."

As they boarded the dropship and it lifted off, soaring up through the clouds the Arbiter looked back down at Sanghelios, the world he had been born on, slowly being burnt by what remained of the Sangheili fleets, it was a shame he would never walk upon the surface of his home again, but Cole had been right, it was a bad idea to leave a single Flood spore intact.

As Rtas had said not long ago, "A single Flood spore can destroy a species." It had almost become a reality.

End
file.